Foul Feathered Review

Nº266

FOWL FEATHERED REVIEW

AEROSTATIC DOSSIER // Δ-77.31(b) / KNOCK INDEX ∴ 4:13:4∞
Drifted as Utility Residue, Declared Sufficient About the Asked (Collected Under Practice Conditions)

FOWL FEATHERED REVIEW
A Journal of Administrative Gothic & Bricolage World-Building
Published at irregular intervals from Bangor, Maine.

Fowl Feathered Review is devoted to Administrative Gothic and Bricolage World-Building.

We publish fiction, poetry, essays, visual art, invented scholarship, municipal folklore, impossible ethnographies, neighborhood cosmologies, documentary fantasies, archival recoveries, procedural myths, and literary artifacts assembled from the overlooked machinery of ordinary life.

Our interest lies less in inventing new worlds than in discovering the hidden architecture already embedded within this one. We believe a city is

composed not only of streets and buildings, but of maintenance corridors, filing cabinets, historical societies, obsolete technologies, misplaced inventories, volunteer committees, rumor, weather, memory, and paperwork that has quietly outlived its original purpose.

We are drawn to stories that emerge from local history, civic infrastructure, institutional language, vernacular knowledge, found objects, forgotten manuals, field guides, maps, radio broadcasts, View-Masters, storefronts, zoning disputes, maintenance logs, discarded catalogs, public notices, and neighborhood traditions. The marvelous should arrive through documentation rather than proclamation.

The fantastic need not descend from another universe. It may already be waiting in a basement archive, a public library vertical file, a county ledger, an abandoned utility tunnel, or the handwritten annotations in a manual nobody has checked out since 1978.

We admire careful observation, literary playfulness, serious nonsense, comic precision, scholarly invention, and worlds assembled through accumulation rather than exposition. We encourage work that treats bureaucracy as folklore, infrastructure as mythology, and ordinary places as inexhaustible sources of wonder.

Our guiding assumption is simple:

The archive is a neighborhood.

The neighborhood is a forest.

Editorial Principle

No dragons.

More zoning boards.

No chosen ones.

More maintenance departments.

No secret kingdoms.

More historical societies.

The impossible should always arrive with supporting documentation.

We do not curate in the modern sense. We maintain instead an Offenrückraum (open-back space), in which items may enter, settle, or misfile themselves.

Participants (hereafter: “important locals”) are those who exhibit Dauerträgheit—a useful persistence under minor strain. Fragility is not prohibited, but it is structurally unsupported.

Any submission that appears to strive toward “Art” in the self-declarative sense will be reassigned to a more stable function (e.g., table-leveling, draft-blocking, oil-absorption).
On the Operation of Source-Engines (Always in Partial Motion)

Warenregisterbruch (Arcade Index Condition)

Fragments are extracted from catalogs, labels, packaging, and signage. Context is removed. Adjacency is reassigned. Authority increases in proportion to specificity, regardless of accuracy.

Protokollhäufigung (Dossier Stack Condition)

Records accumulate: maintenance notes, claims, timestamps. Gaps are preserved. Contradictions are not resolved. A sequence may appear, but closure is considered a filing error.

Randbemerkungsdrift (False Commentator Condition)

Functional texts (manuals, glossaries, guides) are annotated beyond their tolerance. Explanations become misaligned. Confidence is retained.
Anweisungsschnitt (Cut-Up Recorder Condition)
Instruction-language is segmented and recombined. Repetition introduces rhythm.

Meaning is reduced until only procedure-residue remains.

All outputs must retain Rückverfolgbarkeit (trace-feel): the impression that the fragment could be located again in some drawer, binder, or glove compartment.

Where this condition fails, the material is considered decorative and is removed.

A recurring sonic marker—transcribed provisionally as “dor”—is permitted to enter any layer. Its function remains under study.

On Repurposing (Important Clarification)

All submitted materials enter a Weiterverwendungskreis (cycle of further use).

Possible outcomes include:

Inclusion as fragment within a larger construct

Mislabeling and redistribution

Use as structural support (physical or textual)

Reduction to residue for future recombination

Authors retain attribution only in the lowest archival sense. Function supersedes origin.

The current operational formula is recorded as:

$$[(\mathrm{DOR} \times 7)^2 + 11\mathrm{B}] \div \Sigma(\text{Loose Matter})$$

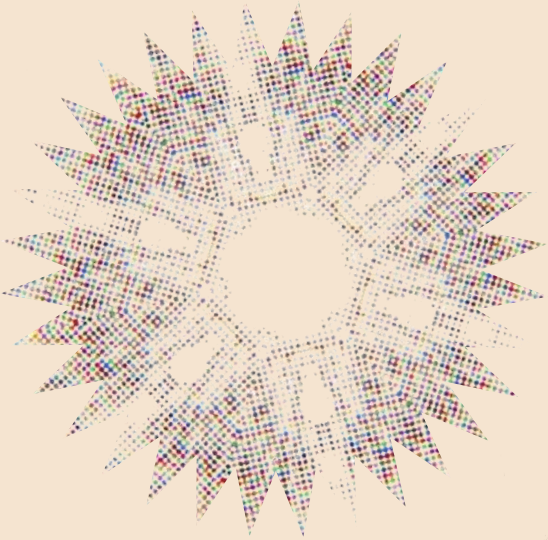
$$= 0.004 \text{ Useful Units}$$

Verification remains impossible due to kettle interference and unresolved parking-lot acoustics.

Delivery

Materials may be delivered, transmitted, or misplaced. Retrieval is opportunistic. Loss is considered a form of delayed submission.

LISTEN — OBSERVE
MISFILE — REPEAT
BE USEFUL
STAY LOOSE
NO LIMITS
NO END



The Staff (Sink-Custodians / Function-Bearers)

Virgil Kay: Final Arbiter. Currently engaged in the classification of falling bakery items under aerodynamic variance. Maintains decision authority, though criteria are mobile.

Silent Bill: Overseer of Tactical Non-Sequiturs. Executes Satzabbruchhandlung (sentence-break action) by leaving mid-utterance. This is considered a valid editorial intervention.

Unkie Bob: Assigned to Casual Entropy. No longer dismantles structures directly; instead applies insufficient fastening (Lockerbefestigung), allowing failure to emerge without announcement.

The Unnamed Dishwasher: Not recorded in official listings. Present regardless. Performs continuous surface-restoration under high focus. Functions as Kerntriebwerk (core engine). Prolonged observation is discouraged.

“NON IGNARA MALI, MISERIS
SUCCERRERE DISCO.”
— VIRGIL

Fowl Feathered Review

Treasury Cycle • Bangor Continuum Office • Issue ∞

REGISTRY OF MORTALITY & MOBILITY

Eternal Ledger / Nothing Occurs Once

City of Bangor Treasury Office
All Times • All Versions
All Streets • All Layers

Docket No.
1911.1964.2026.
∞

Bangor, Maine
All Eras Simultaneous

City of Bangor — Continuously True — Non-Linear Seal

Compiled simultaneously by three Clerks of Time & City

Vincent of Beauvais
Temporal Index Clerk of Bangor
Author of the *Mirror of the World (and Municipal Supplements)*

Jacobus de Voragine
Restyler of Living Saints & Ongoing Events
Compiler of the *Golden Legend (and Sidewalk Hagiographies)*

Rashid al-din Hamadani
Nonlinear Census Authority of Bangor
Historian of Worlds (and Their Overlapping *Municipalities*)

All entries co-signed under the doctrine: Nothing Here Occurs Once

I. On the Status of the Subject
(Who is also already filed elsewhere)

The subject enters City Hall, but also does not enter City Hall.

In one register, they are present.
In another, they are still approaching.
In a third, they have already left and are being reviewed for motion compliance.
They declare:
"Temporary in essence, ambulatory in function."

Vincent: *All functions are temporary. Essence is an indexing error.*

Jacobus: *The walker is always canonized mid-step.*

Rashid: *This person exists in at least three municipal centuries simultaneously.*

II. Registry of Mortality
(Mortality as distributed file)

Mortality is not recorded as an event.
It is filed as a recurring document with multiple timestamps.
— the subject is dead in 1914 (Opera House fire record layer)
— alive in 1964 (Urban Renewal testimony layer)
— unverified but walking in 2026 (current pedestrian index layer)
— and absent in a version of Bangor that has already been replaced by parking infrastructure

Jacobus: *Sainthood is what happens when death forgets which version it belongs to.*

Vincent: *Death is not an endpoint; it is a cross-reference.*

Rashid: *Mortality is a disagreement between archives.*

Virgil Kay (Editor Rooster China Wok Habitué) Stamps:
MORTALITY: SIMULTANEOUSLY ACTIVE / INACTIVE / RECURSIVE

III. Registry of Mobility
(Motion as non-linear permission)

The footwear apparatus is inspected across multiple timelines:
— in one: it is shoes
— in another: it is wheels
— in another: it is evidence of municipal optimism
— in another: it has never been assembled but is still approved

When activated, it produces motion that does not relocate the subject so much as updates their position in different versions of the same street.

Vincent: *Movement is editorial revision applied to space.*

Jacobus: *The street blesses those who pass through its alternate drafts.*

Rashid: *Travel is what happens when cities disagree with themselves.*

Virgil Kay Stamps:
MORILITY: GRANTED ACROSS ALL KNOWN STREET VARIANTS

IV. The City Hall as Stacked Time Object

The Treasury Office is observed as:
- a room that exists in 1911 (fire memory layer)
- 1964 (planning abstraction layer)
- 1997 (restoration impulse layer)
- 2026 (current fluorescent administrative layer)
- and an unbuilt future where it is a parking lot remembering itself as a building

Walls contain:
- scroll fragments that have not yet been written
- newspaper clippings reporting future loss
- maps that disagree politely with each other
- stamps that remember being used differently

A Chant Moves Through All Layers at Once:

All permits are continuous
All streets are simultaneous
All walking is revisiting

V. Entities That Occur Outside Time but Inside Record

Paul Bunyan
(Scale Anomaly Witness Across Municipal Layers)
Appears in doorway, simultaneously too large for building and perfectly scaled for it.

Kenduskeag Sasquatch
(Hydrological Continuity Observer)
Waits without waiting; is always already leaving. Witnesses every flood at once.

The Creamsicle Freezer of Outer Bangor Lot
(Perpetual Cold Object)
Contains identical creamsicles in every recorded year. Temperature does not change; only interpretation does.

VI. Footnotes (which occur before and after the text)

[1] Vincent of Beauvais: *"The archive is not storage; it is simultaneity with filing cabinets."*

[2] Jacobus de Voragine: *"Legends are what happens when the present refuses to stay in its assigned tense."*

[3] Rashid al-din Hamadani: *"Bangor cannot be dated. It can only be approached from different administrative angles."*

[4] Virgil Kay: *Stamped note: roller-blade sneakers classified as lateral time instruments.*

VII. Questions That Cannot Be Answered Because They Are Still Occurring

1. Is the subject entering City Hall, or has City Hall entered the subject?
2. If a building burns in one layer but is restored in another, which version requires permits?
3. Do wheels move a person, or move the street under them?
4. Who signs a document that has already been signed in a different century?
5. Is the creamsicle freezer a place, a memory, or a recurring municipal exception?
6. When Paul Bunyan leaves, does he exit or simply change scale context?
7. Does the Sasquatch require a tax category or a new ontology?

1911: The Great Fire

1914: Opera House Burns

1920: Rebuilt in Style

1964: Urban Renewal Vote

1997: Restoration Begins

2026: Jane's Walks

What's not there and what could be.

All Things Temporary All The Time

This Document Exists In All Its Dates At Once
∞

Subject Released Into Continuous Sidewalk Status
City of Bangor Continues Self-Revision
∞

Final Entry (Non-Terminal)
NOTHING IS FILED ONCE
NOTHING IS OVER
NOTHING IS BEFORE OR AFTER WITHOUT PERMISSION

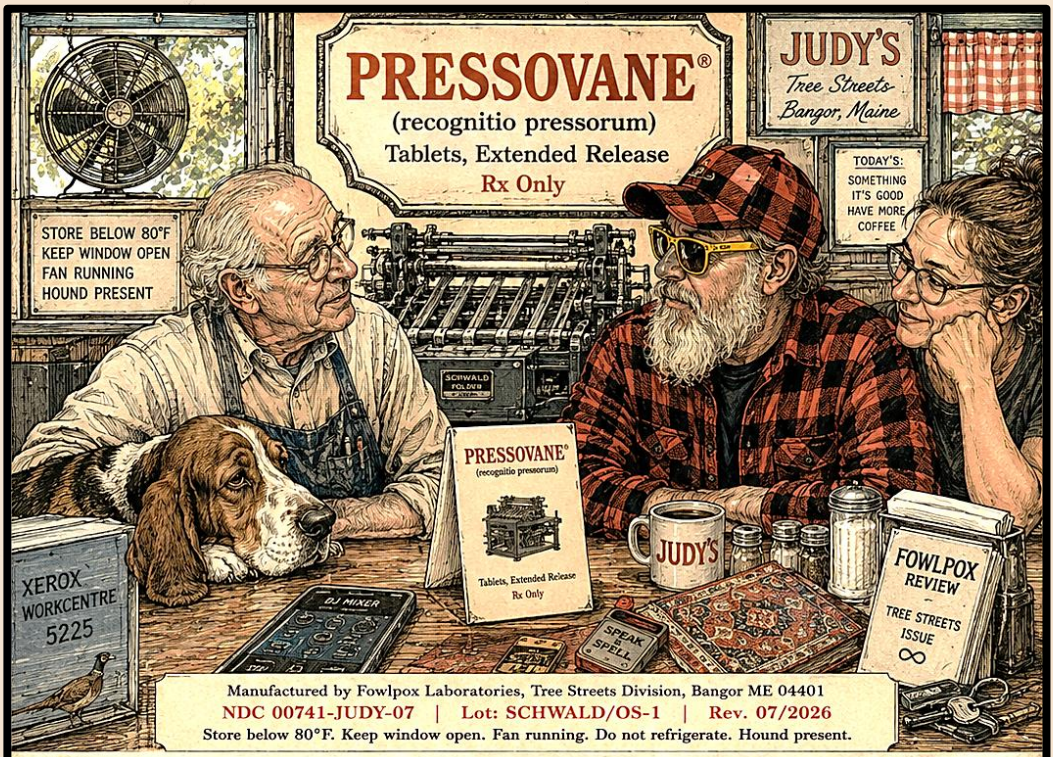
Virgil Kay
Editor Rooster China Wok Habitué
Treasury Clerk & Stamper of Conditional True Things
Virgil Kay

PRESSOVANE®

(recognitio pressorum)

Tablets, Extended Release

Rx Only



Manufactured by Fowlpox Laboratories, Tree Streets Division, Bangor ME 04401

NDC 00741-JUDY-07 | Lot: SCHWALD/OS-1 | Rev. 07/2026

Store below 80°F. Keep window open. Fan running. Do not refrigerate. Hound present.

1. DESCRIPTION

PRESSOVANE® (recognitio pressorum) is a fixed-combination compound consisting of two active ingredients: Gunter Schwald and One Size, presented in a single extended-release format.The encounter occurs at Judy's, a neutral-ground establishment operating within the Tree Streets catchment area, Bangor, Maine.

See full prescribing information.

2. CLINICAL PHARMACOLOGY

2.1 Mechanism of Action

2.2 Pharmacokinetics

3. INDICATIONS AND USAGE

See full prescribing information.

4. CONTRAINDICATIONS

See full prescribing information.

5. WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS

5.1 The Look

5.2 Irreversibility of Guild Recognition

5.3 The Folding Machine Question

See full prescribing information.

6. ADVERSE REACTIONS

6.1 Clinical Trials Experience

6.2 Post-Marketing Experience

See full prescribing information.

7. DRUG INTERACTIONS

7.1 Judy's (Environmental Interaction)

7.2 The Mirage (Vehicular Interaction)

7.3 Xerox WorkCentre 5225 (Equipment Interaction)

7.4 Tree Streets Mycorrhizal Network (Systemic Interaction)

See full prescribing information.

8. DOSAGE AND ADMINISTRATION

Step 1: Judy's. Sit.

Step 2: The manifesto is present. It does not need to be produced.

Step 3: One Size sees it.

Step 4: The look.

Step 5: Ink. Pica. The space between what is said and what is meant.

Step 6: Mitty.

Step 7: The question about the Mirage.

See full prescribing information.

9. HOW SUPPLIED / STORAGE AND HANDLING

Folded to matchbook dimensions on 45gsm pharmaceutical-grade paper. Sealed with light epoxy. Lot: SCHWALD/OS-1.

Store below 80°F. Keep window open. Fan running. Hound present.

Do not store in the Mirage unattended.

See full prescribing information.

10. PATIENT COUNSELING INFORMATION

10.1 What Gunter Does Not Yet Know

10.2 What One Size Does Not Yet Know

10.3 General Counseling

See full prescribing information.

PRESSOVANE® is a trademark of Fowlpox Laboratories, Tree Streets Division.

Manufactured under the auspices of the Tree Streets mycorrhizal network.

This insert has been folded and sealed. If you are reading it, it has already worked.

NDC 00741-JUDY-07 Rev. 07/2026 Rx Only

PRESSOVANE®

(recognitio pressorum)

Tablets, Extended Release

Rx Only

Manufactured by Fowlpox Laboratories, Tree Streets Division, Bangor ME 04401

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1. DESCRIPTION

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GUNTER SCHWALD (active ingredient I) is an elderly male practitioner of industrial compression arts, formerly employed by pharmaceutical insert manufacturers in an unspecified mid-Atlantic region. He presents at baseline in a bank-repossessed fixer-upper on a named tree street, occupying approximately 1,100 square feet of which the folding machine accounts for a functionally significant proportion. A box

fan operates in the south-facing window. The fan does not cool the room. It circulates intent.

MITTY (inactive excipient, hound) is a standard basset hound of indeterminate age whose primary pharmacological function is olfactory pre-screening of all incoming compounds. Mitty is not listed as an active ingredient but should not be considered inert.

The MANIFESTO (delivery vehicle) is produced on-site using a vintage industrial folding machine originally manufactured for pharmaceutical insert production. It is folded to matchbook dimensions, sealed with light epoxy, and presents externally as Prescribing Information. It is not

Prescribing Information. It is the other thing.

ONE SIZE (active ingredient II) is a Tree Streets zinemeister of established practice, operating a 1998 Mitsubishi Mirage as mobile athenaeum. He presents with his wife. His wife functions as the control group and the only reliable witness. He wears a plaid shacket. His yellow glasses are not prescription. He has a beard in which several ongoing projects are stored.

2. CLINICAL PHARMACOLOGY

2.1 MECHANISM OF ACTION

PRESSOVANE operates via a recognition cascade initiated by fold tolerance. When One Size visually confirms the manifesto's crease registration — tolerances consistent

with industrial pharmaceutical-grade machinery, not hand-folding, not Xerox — a neurological event occurs that cannot be walked back. The cascade proceeds as follows:

(i) Visual confirmation of fold tolerances.

(ii) Cross-referencing against forty years of known fold signatures.

(iii) Involuntary lateral eye movement toward wife.

(iv) The look. See Section 5.1.

(v) Mitty relocates chin to wife's foot. Mechanism unclear but consistently observed.

(vi) Conversation about ink begins. Conversation is not about ink.

The primary mechanism distinguishing PRESSOVANE from ordinary social encounter is the bypass of introductory language. Printers know each other. This is not a metaphor. It is a diagnostic criterion.

2.2 PHARMACOKINETICS

Onset: immediate upon visual confirmation of manifesto. No titration required. No introduction required. Effect is not dose-dependent; a single manifesto at therapeutic fold tolerance produces maximum response.

Duration: indeterminate. One Size will ask if the folding machine fits in the Mirage. This question is not the end of anything.

Distribution: the recognition distributes across the Tree Streets mycorrhizal network within 72 hours. This is not a side effect. This is the intended delivery system.

3. INDICATIONS AND USAGE

PRESSOVANE® is indicated for:

(a) Gaps in the Tree Streets mycorrhizal network requiring a new node.

(b) Late-onset collaboration between practitioners of compression arts who found each other after the industry contracted around them.

(c) Bank-repossessed houses requiring an additional reason to be inhabited.

(d) Folding machines operating without an audience who understands them.

(e) Zinesters who have been producing in isolation long enough that the isolation has become load-bearing.

PRESSOVANE is not indicated for ordinary friendship, networking, or professional collaboration of the standard kind. It is indicated specifically for the recognition that occurs when two people have spent decades working at the same problem from different angles and meet in a diner on a summer afternoon and do not need to explain themselves.

4. CONTRAINDICATIONS

PRESSOVANE® is contraindicated in:

(a) Patients who unfold things to explain them.

(b) Patients who ask what the manifesto means before reading it.

(c) Environments where Judy's is not operating or has run out of whatever Judy serves.

(d) Patients who would describe Gunter's folding machine as a hobby.

(e) Patients who would describe One Size's Mirage as unreliable. It is sufficient.

5. WARNINGS AND PRECAUTIONS

5.1 THE LOOK

The involuntary lateral eye movement toward One Size's wife (see Section 2.1, step iii) is irreversible. Once administered, One Size cannot un-see the manifesto or un-know its implications. His wife has seen this look before. She knows what it

means for the next several weeks. Patients should be counseled accordingly.

The look carries the following simultaneous transmissions:

— Do you see this.

— I am not going to be able to pretend I am not interested.

— This is going to cost us something.

All three transmissions are accurate. None require verbal confirmation.

5.2 IRREVERSIBILITY OF GUILD RECOGNITION

Once two practitioners of compression arts have recognized each other, the recognition cannot be administratively

reversed. Printers know each other. This knowledge, once activated, persists across all subsequent Tree Streets encounters. Gunter Schwald is now in the network. The network did not ask his permission. Neither did he ask the network's.

5.3 THE FOLDING MACHINE QUESTION

One Size will ask if the folding machine fits in the Mirage. This question should not be answered immediately. Allow it to exist as the question it actually is, which is not about the Mirage.

6. ADVERSE REACTIONS

6.1 CLINICAL TRIALS EXPERIENCE

The following adverse reactions were observed during the single documented

administration of PRESSOVANE at Judy's, Tree Streets, Bangor, Maine, summer 2026:

COMMON (occurring in 100% of administrations):

– The look (see 5.1).

– Mitty's chin relocating to One Size's wife's foot within ten minutes.

– Conversation presenting as being about ink and pica while being about something else.

– One Size's wife understanding what is actually being discussed before either man does.

UNCOMMON:

— Gunter misreading the intensity of One Size's interest as more ordinary than it is. This corrects within one additional meeting.

RARE:

— The manifesto being unfolded at the table. Contraindicated. See Section 4.

6.2 POST-MARKETING EXPERIENCE

The following have been reported following broader deployment of PRESSOVANE within the Tree Streets network. Because these events are reported voluntarily from a mycorrhizal population of uncertain size, it is not always possible to establish frequency:

– The folding machine becoming a recurring topic before anyone intended.

– One Size acquiring knowledge of pharmaceutical insert production standards that subsequently appear in his zines without attribution, which is correct.

– Mitty being described by One Size's wife as 'the only one at the table who was honest.'

– Gunter understanding, some days after Judy's, what actually happened to him there.

7. DRUG INTERACTIONS

7.1 JUDY'S (ENVIRONMENTAL INTERACTION)

Judy's functions as the solvent in which PRESSOVANE dissolves and becomes

bioavailable. Administration in other environments has not been studied. It is suspected that the Tree Streets themselves constitute a delivery mechanism, but Judy's is the point of absorption.

7.2 THE MIRAGE (VEHICULAR INTERACTION)

Concomitant presence of the 1998 Mitsubishi Mirage Athenaeum potentiates PRESSOVANE significantly. The Mirage is not merely transportation. It is a known compression environment containing Persian carpets, a DJ mixer app, a Speak & Spell, and the accumulated evidence of forty-odd years of One Size's practice. Gunter's folding machine represents a compound that the Mirage has been waiting for without knowing it. The interaction is synergistic.

7.3 THE XEROX WORKCENTRE 5225 (EQUIPMENT INTERACTION)

One Size's WorkCentre and Gunter's folding machine should not be co-administered in the same physical space until the Mirage question (see 5.3) has been resolved. Both are altar-class equipment. Two altars in one room require negotiation.

7.4 THE TREE STREETS MYCORRHIZAL NETWORK (SYSTEMIC INTERACTION)

PRESSOVANE does not remain local to Judy's. It distributes through the network. Olga Abel should be considered a potential secondary recipient. The network will route accordingly without being asked.

8. DOSAGE AND ADMINISTRATION

One sitting. One manifesto. One introduction, which is not required but will happen anyway because One Size's wife will provide it when the men have been sitting in parallel silence long enough that it becomes socially notable.

Do not force conversation about the machine before the machine has been seen. The machine will be discussed. It cannot be prevented. Allow the natural sequence:

Step 1: Judy's. Sit.

Step 2: The manifesto is present. It does not need to be produced. Its presence is sufficient.

Step 3: One Size sees it.

Step 4: The look.

Step 5: Ink. Pica. The space between what is said and what is meant, which is where PRESSOVANE operates.

Step 6: Mitty.

Step 7: The question about the Mirage.

Do not administer a second dose at the same sitting. PRESSOVANE is extended release. It will continue working after Judy's. It will be working three days later when Gunter is at the open window with the fan running and understands what the afternoon actually was.

9. HOW SUPPLIED / STORAGE AND HANDLING

PRESSOVANE® (recognitio pressorum) Tablets, Extended Release are supplied as follows:

– Folded to matchbook dimensions on 45gsm pharmaceutical-grade paper.

– Sealed with light epoxy applied post-fold at the Tree Streets facility.

– Lot: SCHWALD/OS-1. This lot is finite. The machine knows the count.

– Available only within the Tree Streets catchment area, Bangor, Maine.

– Dispensed at Judy's. Not available at chain pharmacies.

– Your pharm tech wife probably knows about this. Ask her.

Storage conditions: below 80°F where possible. Window open. Fan running. Hound present at all times. Do not store in the Mirage unattended. The Mirage is sufficient but the pheasant situation has not been fully resolved and pheasants and manifestos should not be left together overnight.

10. PATIENT COUNSELING INFORMATION

10.1 WHAT GUNTER DOES NOT YET KNOW

Gunter Schwald should be informed of the following, at a time he is ready to receive it, which is not Judy's and is not that afternoon:

– He has been recognized. This is not the same as being understood, but it is the precondition.

– The Tree Streets did not acquire him. He acquired them. The distinction matters to no one but him, and it matters to him enormously.

– The manifesto has been read. Not unfolded – read. One Size read it the way you read a fold. This is the correct way.

– Forty years of folding other people's words prepared him to fold his own. This was not a detour.

– Mitty already knew.

10.2 WHAT ONE SIZE DOES NOT YET KNOW

One Size should be informed of the following, which his wife already knows

and will not tell him because he needs to find it himself:

– The folding machine does not fit in the Mirage. This is not the point of asking.

– Gunter has been folding alone for longer than One Size has been in the Tree Streets.

– The finite manifesto series has a count. When One Size learns the count, he will recognize it as the correct number without being told why.

– He looked at his wife like he'd been handed a hundred dollars. She noted this. She will mention it later, in the car, in the tone she uses when she is right and is not requiring acknowledgment.

10.3 GENERAL COUNSELING

Patients should be advised that PRESSOVANE does not produce resolution. It produces continuation. The Tree Streets are a mycorrhizal network, not a narrative. Connections do not conclude. They distribute.

The fan in the window will keep running. The machine will keep folding. The manifestos are finite but the recognition, having been administered, is not.

Mitty will be fine.

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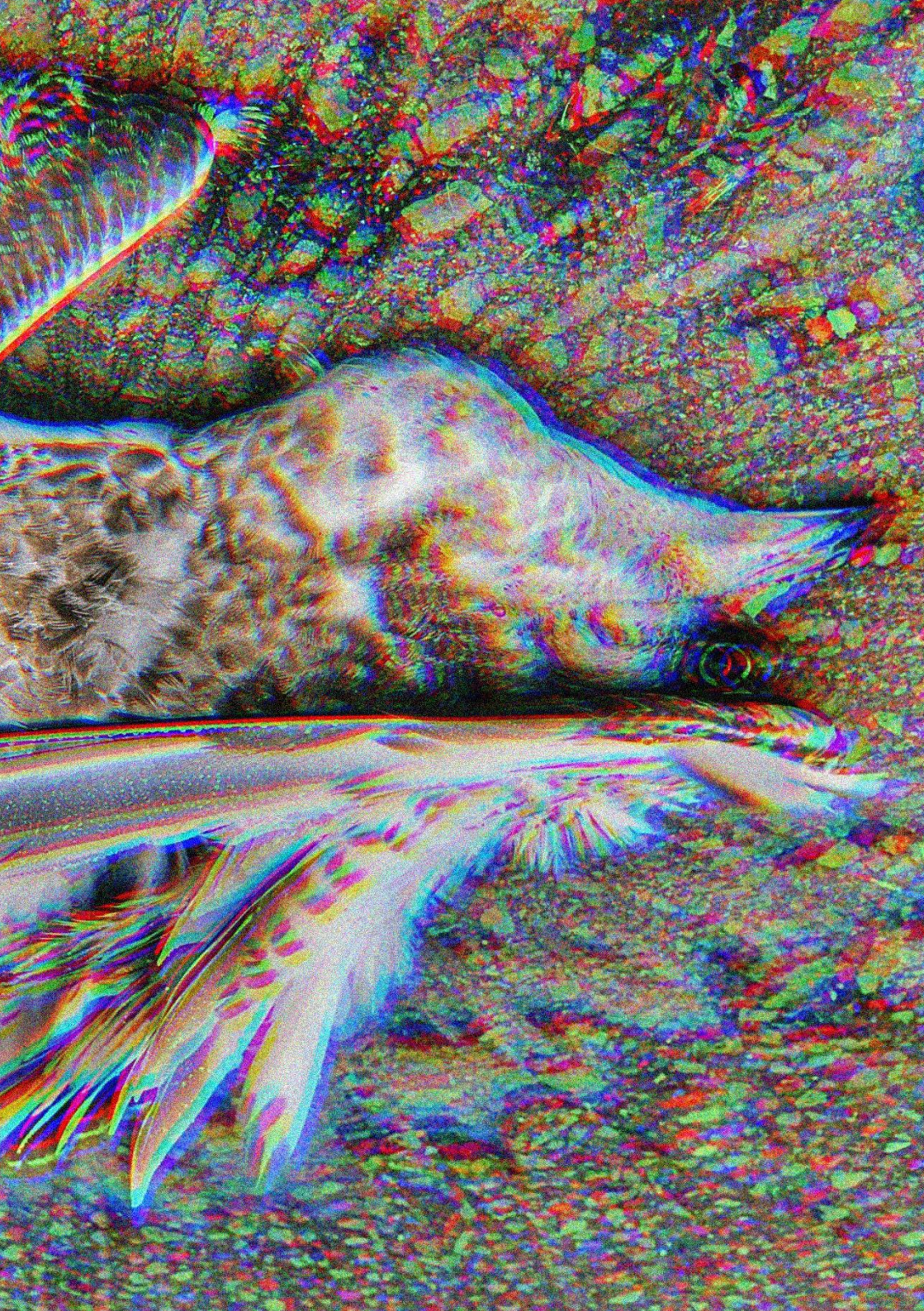
Manufactured under the auspices of the Tree Streets mycorrhizal network.

This insert has been folded and sealed. If you are reading it, it has already worked.

NDC 00741-JUDY-07 Rev. 07/2026 Rx Only



THE LAST EGRESSIVE

A FEUILLETON IN THE MANNER OF
CORNÉLIUS HOLFF,
WITH FOOTNOTES THAT HAVE BECOME ROOMS

Cornelius M. Huffy

I. A Color Nobody Can Agree Upon

He wore teal with the fidelity of a monk. ..... [1]

II. The Historical Side Door: A Brief Civilization of the Inhaled Word

His speech emerged entirely upon inhalation. ..... [3]

III. The Magnificent Imbalance, Applied to a Toe

Twice a year, wax. Then gold. ..... [4]

IV. The False Emergency: Three Rooms in Crisis

Silk. Cashmere. Maps of subway systems that go nowhere. .....

V. The Telephone, and the Porcelain Urinals of Idaho

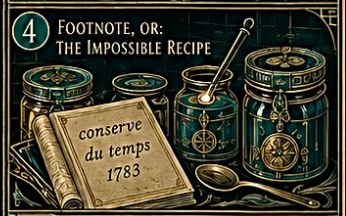
One Tuesday afternoon — Tuesdays having long specialized in the delivery of structural news. ..... [5]

VI. The Ancient Direction

The friends leaned in. .....

VII. Doyle New York, and the Final Shrug

Months later the auction house catalogued the estate. .....



SECOND TOE	LEFT LITTLE TOE	HALLUX, RIGHT	FOURTH TOE, LEFT	THIRD TOE, RIGHT	SECOND TOE, LEFT	LITTLE TOE, RIGHT
AUTUMN MODERATE OPTIMISM	HIGH HUMIDITY QUIET DREAD DISGUISED AS CURIOSITY	LATE SPRING THE PECULIAR LIGHTNESS THAT FOLLOWS THE DECISION NOT TO EXPLAIN ONESELF	WINTER THE COLOR OF THINGS BEFORE SNOW REMEMBERS WHAT IT COVERS	EARLY SUMMER RESTLESSNESS WITHOUT DESTINATION	EARLY SUMMER THE KIND OF MELANCHOLY THAT POURS SOFTLY	UNSEASONABLE CLARITY MILD ASTONISHMENT

THE LAST EGRESSIVE

A Feuilleton in the Manner of

Cornélius Holff,

with Footnotes That Have Become Rooms

--- Cornelius M. Huffy

I. A COLOR NOBODY CAN AGREE UPON

He wore teal with the fidelity of a monk.

Not the lazy teal of department-store swimwear, nor the timid teal that apologizes for having once known blue. Every registered species passed through his wardrobe: peacock teal, petroleum teal, oxidized copper, faded swimming-pool liner, tropical lagoon three hours after rain when the light has grown philosophical. His Paris tailor, having exhausted the ordinary questions, ceased the vulgar business of matching altogether. The only remaining inquiry, delivered with the gravity once reserved for vestments, was:

"Which teal?"

That is not a question a tailor asks. That is a question a theologian asks.

The comparison to monastic habit is more precise than it first appears, because the Cistercian did not choose undyed wool for beauty but for the abolition of choice — dye was vanity, and vanity was time, and time belonged to God. Our subject inverted the arithmetic exactly: he abolished

choice not by refusing color but by refusing all other colors, which achieves the identical spiritual result by the opposite road — the road, we note approvingly, that is longer.[1]

He had inherited the means for this devotion from an uncle whose sole documented hobby had been the acquisition of bankrupt umbrella factories[2] — a fortune that was, by the time it reached the nephew, already half-metaphor.

[1] **FOOTNOTE, OR: THE ROOM OF THE ARGUING DYERS.** The medieval European dye guilds were sorted by law into woad men (blue) and madder men (red), and in several German cities it was a punishable offense for a blue-dyer to produce green, since green required trespassing into yellow, which belonged to a third party. Green was therefore, for roughly two centuries, a legal violation rather than a color. Blue-green — our teal — was doubly illicit: a trespass compounded by a trespass. A man who dresses exclusively in blue-green is unknowingly wearing four hundred years of guild litigation. He is a walking lawsuit. Nobody told him. It would not have changed anything.

[2] **FOOTNOTE, OR: THE MUSEUM OF MISREAD SKIES.** Bankrupt umbrella factories are not merely failed businesses; they are museums of optimism that misread the weather. One imagines the final inventory: acres of black canopies folded like the wings of defeated angels, ribs of metal still hopeful, handles worn by hands that believed the sky could be negotiated with. The nephew understood this without needing to say so. He rarely needed to say anything in the ordinary direction.

II. THE HISTORICAL SIDE DOOR: A BRIEF CIVILIZATION OF THE INHALED WORD

His speech emerged entirely upon inhalation.

Nearly everything ever said by nearly everyone who has ever lived has been said on the way out. The pulmonic egressive airstream is the substrate of human meaning: the lung empties, the folds vibrate, the mouth shapes the leaving air into a promise or a lie. Every declaration of war, every marriage vow, every "I'm fine" — all of it, exhaust. Civilization is a byproduct of deflation.[3]

Visitors required several afternoons and at least one mild existential adjustment. Every sentence seemed to pull the room inward, as if the furniture itself were being gently asked to reconsider its attachment to the floor. Compliments arrived as soft vacuums; questions sounded like the sea withdrawing from a beach in the ancient, courteous warning that precedes a wave.

The inhaled word is no invention of eccentrics, however — it is attested. Swedish and Norwegian speakers say ja on the intake, a small breathy affirmation meaning roughly yes, and I am still listening, and please continue. The Ainu did it. Speakers in Newfoundland do it. Certain Tamil speakers, certain Finnish grandmothers, certain nurses in certain wards at four in the morning. Linguists file this under **pulmonic ingressive phonation** and file it quickly, the way one files a relative's hobby.

But observe what these cultures reserve the inhaled sound for. Not commerce. Not instruction. They reserve it for **agreement, sympathy, and the acknowledgment of grief.** Which means our subject, by speaking his entire

life on the intake, had accidentally arranged matters so that every sentence he uttered — his laundry instructions, his complaints about the Rio humidity, his opinion of a restaurant — arrived in the acoustic costume of condolence.

His spoken-word albums sold modestly. Critics, reaching for language the way a drowning man reaches for a floating monograph, called them reverse respiration as aesthetic philosophy. Listeners who surrendered to them described the effect as oddly calming, like being breathed by a larger, more patient lung.

Doctors — those perpetual accountants of the body — warned that extended pulmonic ingressive speech placed unusual demands upon the vocal folds. He thanked them. Ingressively. The thanks itself seemed to vacuum a small portion of their professional certainty out of the consultation room.

[3] **FOOTNOTE, OR: THE ENTIRE SECOND BUILDING.** Here we must house, briefly, the profession of the glassblower's boy, extinct since roughly 1910, whose duty in the Bohemian works

was to breathe for the master when the master's lungs failed him in the last hour of a shift — an apprentice standing at the pipe's cold end, supplying wind on command so another man's vessel could take shape. He never saw the glass. He was paid in breath-units. There exists a Bohemian saying, possibly invented by someone else, that a good glassblower's boy learns to exhale on someone else's rhythm and forgets his own entirely. Our subject managed something the boys never did: he made his rhythm unshareable. Nobody could breathe for him. Whether this is independence or loneliness is precisely the question the reader is invited to leave unanswered.

III. THE MAGNIFICENT IMBALANCE, APPLIED TO A TOE

Twice a year, wax. Then gold.

Each pendant, cast by a patient jeweler who had abandoned questions years earlier the way certain monks abandon the names of the months, represented a particular year, season, humidity, and emotional condition. He catalogued them

with the tender bureaucracy of a man who understands that the self is mostly weather wearing a skeleton:

Second toe. Autumn. Moderate optimism.

Left little toe. High humidity. Quiet dread disguised as curiosity.

Hallux, right. Late spring. The peculiar lightness that follows the decision not to explain oneself.

The instinct is to laugh, and the laugh is permitted, and we will collect it now so it does not interrupt us later.

Because consider what he had actually constructed. Not jewelry — a **register**. We have barometers for the sky; we have the chronometer, the sextant, the seismograph, the assay balance accurate to the weight of an eyelash. We have spent four thousand years perfecting the surveillance of things. For the interior — the difference between the man one was in the spring of a good year and the man one became by the following February — we have nothing but the

diary, that unreliable witness, that flatterer, that inveterate editor of the record.

He distrusted the diary. He went to the toe. And the toe, whatever else may be said of it, **cannot lie**. It swells in humidity and contracts in cold and does not care what you would prefer to remember about August. He had located the one part of himself incapable of self-promotion and made it the official archivist of his life.[4]

Museums declined, as museums often do when confronted with devotion that has not yet been laundered into theory. Collectors did not decline. Collectors are the last people on earth still willing to be interested in something before they understand it.

[4] **FOOTNOTE, OR: THE IMPOSSIBLE RECIPE.** There survives in a Lyonnais household book of 1783 a preparation titled conserve du temps — "preserve of the season" — instructing the cook to seal, each quarter, a single spoonful of that month's most ordinary dish, unlabeled, in wax, and to open the jars only when a member of the household is dying, so the dying may taste the

recipe includes no ingredients. It could not; the ingredients were whatever there had been. It is not a recipe. It is a machine for grief, disguised as cookery to get past the censor of embarrassment. The gold toes are the same machine. The disguise is simply more expensive.

IV. THE FALSE EMERGENCY: THREE ROOMS IN CRISIS

Silk. Cashmere. Maps of subway systems that go nowhere. Scarves printed with extinct birds that had never existed, yet somehow looked disappointed in us. Weave so loose it constituted a meteorological event rather than a textile.

Three rooms.

Let us treat this with the seriousness it demands, which is to say: total. **THE SITUATION IS GRAVE.** A private citizen has permitted the accumulation of neck-coverings to breach the domestic threshold and colonize habitable space. The scarf begins as function — the Roman focale, worn by legionaries to prevent the lorica from flaying the throat during march, a pad against friction. Twenty centuries later the descendant of that pad

is printed with the transit map of a city that does ot exist, and it occupies a room in Paris that could otherwise have held a person. **THE ENTIRE ARC OF WESTERN MATERIAL CULTURE HANGS IN THE BALANCE.** From necessity to ornament to surplus to habitation. The objects have won. The objects have taken the house.

And what did he say about it?

"They require companionship."

There is the collapse, and it is not into absurdity but through absurdity and out the other side, which is the only exit worth using. He was not defending a hoard. He was explaining, in the only vocabulary available to a man who could not say it directly, that the rooms were full because he was not. One does not leave a climate alone; it grows lonely and begins to invent storms. The scarves kept each other company. Somebody had to.

V. THE TELEPHONE, AND THE PORCELAIN URINALS OF IDAHO

One Tuesday afternoon — Tuesdays having long specialized in the delivery of structural news — a genealogist telephoned to report an administrative error of forty-odd years' standing. The woman he had believed to be his mother was not. His actual mother, after decades of silence and clerical confusion, had spent her working life installing porcelain urinals throughout commercial buildings in Idaho.[5]

We must resist mockery here. Mockery is the short route. Take the long one: what she did was plumbing, and plumbing is the single most reliable predictor of human life expectancy ever devised, outperforming physicians by centuries. She ensured that what leaves the body departs cleanly and does not return. She was, in the most literal and unglamorous sense available, a professional of **egress**.

And her son — unknown to her, unknown to himself — had built an entire existence, an entire voice, an entire acoustic identity, upon the refusal

to let anything leave him at all. He inhaled his words. He kept his breath. He collected his own toes so that no year could escape unrecorded. He filled three rooms with fabric on the grounds that objects get lonely.

She sent things away. He held everything in.

Nobody designed this. That is what makes it unbearable.

He thanked the genealogist. Ingressively. He hung up. He sat. He looked at a gold cast of his left little toe — catalogued, if memory serves, under unseasonable clarity, mild astonishment — the smallest, the least useful, the one that exists chiefly to be struck against furniture in the dark. And his heart, that pump, that other machine of moving things through and out, stopped agreeing to continue.

[5] **FOOTNOTE, OR: A FORM OF PUBLIC SCULPTURE.** Porcelain urinals in commercial buildings across Idaho constitute, if one is willing to squint with sufficient charity, a meditation on necessity. The mother, unnamed in the genealogical report and therefore free to become

slightly mythical, spent decades ensuring that the bladder's ancient emergency had somewhere elegant to go. There is a strange maternal logic here that the son, had he lived longer in the egressive mode, might eventually have inhaled into art. Idaho, for its part, accepted the urinals with the stoicism it applies to potatoes and weather.

VI. THE ANCIENT DIRECTION

The friends leaned in. They had been trained by decades to lean in; his sentences had always pulled the room toward him, and they had learned to fall forward slightly, the way one leans over a well.

And then his chest relaxed. The lungs emptied. The air went the old way — the way of every market cry and battlefield order and lullaby, the way of the Cistercian and the glassblower's boy and the woman in Idaho and the duck for which the color is named, the effortless pulmonic egressive stream, the great common inheritance he had spent seventy years politely declining.

"Goodness."

One word. Not a summary. Not a verdict. It is a word we no longer know how to use — an exclamation of mild surprise, which is what people say when a shelf falls over, and also a noun meaning virtue, the whole of the moral good, the thing philosophers have failed to define since Athens. He used it in a room in which both meanings were simultaneously true and neither could be confirmed, and then he was not available for follow-up questions.

He joined the species on the way out. It took him one word to do it. Everyone else needs a lifetime and still gets it wrong.

VII. DOYLE NEW YORK, AND THE FINAL SHRUG

Months later the auction house catalogued the estate under the heading:

"Objects relating to an unidentified conceptual practice."

This is the most honest sentence any institution has produced in a hundred years, and it was produced by accident, by a junior cataloguer with

a deadline, which is how all honest institutional sentences are produced. We do not know what this man was doing. Here it is anyway. Please bid.

Porters wrapped the necklaces. Folded the scarves — three rooms of companionship, reduced to bales, the imaginary subway maps folded across their own imaginary transfer stations, the birds that never existed going extinct a second time in cardboard. The doors closed. The engine started. The truck pulled into afternoon traffic and became, within ninety seconds, simply a truck.

Long after it disappeared from view, one sound remained, from a recording nobody had thought to stop: a sustained inhaled vowel that had by then given up distinguishing between arrival and departure.

"Oooooh..."

Thus we have traveled through shades of teal sufficient to shame a lagoon, through the litigation of medieval dyers and the extinct trade of the glassblower's boy, through bankrupt umbrella factories and an impossible French recipe for the taste of one's own calendar, through

the sanitary infrastructure of Idaho and the four-thousand-year failure of instrument-makers to build a barometer for the inside of a man, through three rooms of scarves that demanded companionship the way certain lonely cathedrals demand footsteps — only to discover:

He wanted somebody to lean in.

He found a way to make them.

It cost him every breath he had.

WILD CAUGHT
WILD CAUGHT
WILD CAUGHT

THE CHICK-FISH, ATTENDED

a fusion account, unbridled, digressive, occasionally streaming, filed nowhere in particular and therefore everywhere at once

attributed to Scuff Powell

The box arrived, and this is the only fact in the entire matter that nobody – not the hatchery, not the Bureau, not Ellen, not even the man with green hair who may or may not have been standing near the hydrangea at the moment of delivery, though several witnesses later swore to a shape there that resolved, on closer inspection, into nothing but a shape near a hydrangea – nobody disputes.

The box arrived.

It had airholes.

Something inside it was, in the fullest and most unbearable sense of the word, alive.

And this aliveness would, in time, metastasize outward through several jurisdictions, several

documents, several institutions, each convinced it alone possessed the authoritative account, until the event itself became less a chicken than a kind of climate: a low-pressure system stalled permanently over Penobscot County, returning every spring the way certain griefs return every spring, indifferent to whether anyone has finished processing last year's model.

[Here the text pauses, as texts of this kind must periodically pause, to allow a footnote to open — not the meek footnote of academic servitude but the footnote as understood elsewhere: a door, a second building glimpsed through the first. The door opens onto an entire treatise concerning the history of the parcel, the sealed container, the thing-that-arrives-already-decided, from the Trojan crate to the plain brown box left on a porch in 1987 containing, according to family legend never verified and now impossible to verify since everyone who could verify it has died or moved to Arizona, a set of encyclopedias nobody ordered.

The treatise, before it can properly begin, is interrupted.]

– by Ellen.

Not participating in the footnotes. Not respecting their architecture.

“That's not a mailbox problem.”

Which is, of course, precisely wrong and precisely correct in the manner of everything Ellen says.

It is not a mailbox problem in the ordinary sense. The mailbox did not order it. The mailbox did not consent to it. The mailbox did not fill out the requisite Consignee Acknowledgment (Department A, filed, standing note reissued verbatim year over year under new consignee names, the nation were discontented and wished to leave their barren and inhospitable shores, a line nobody remembers writing and everybody keeps re-filing).

And yet it is entirely a mailbox problem in the deeper sense.

The mailbox is where the world's decisions arrive to be discovered by people who did not make them.

It is the domestic threshold where the vast anonymous upstream — hatchery, catalog, printer, whichever unpaid intern typed hardy, friendly, ideal for beginners into a template unchanged since a decade nobody can name — finally, embarrassingly, becomes personal.

"It has airholes," says the voice — call him the husband, though marriage in this account functions less as a sacrament than as a shared jurisdiction, two names on one lease, two signatures on one manifest.

"It's making a sound."

"Mailboxes don't make sounds."

"This one is peeping, Ellen."

And here the narrative, if it can still be called that, opens a second cathedral.

Not the footnote-as-second-building.

The footnote-as-trial.

Because somewhere behind the peeping, behind the ordinary Tuesday-ness of a couple arguing pleasantly beside a mailbox, there convenes — must convene, the form requires it — an unseen

tribunal, procedural, patient, robed in something between apothecary Latin and circus route-book slang.

The chick.

The box.

The hatchery.

The husband.

The green-haired advisory presence, if such a presence existed.

None are present.

All are named.

Refill: 0.

Not a refillable condition.

Recurs on its own schedule, the way certain sorrows recur, the way a man's father's laugh will surface without warning in the man's own throat at fifty-one, uninvited, undeniable.

Filed under Chronic Seasonal, not Acute Novel.

The distinction matters to the ledger, though not to the patient.

And is not this, if one permits oneself the digression — and one must, because refusing digression is merely a more exhausting form of taking it — the entire tragedy and comedy of inheritance?

That the thing recurring was never new.

That it was ordered before you were born.

That it was ordered by the fact of ordering itself.

A catalog reissuing its own bally copy century after century:

a land where there is a herd of deer for every one that skips over your hills.

The noun changes.

The sentence remains.

A coop for every family. A hen for every child. A flock larger than your neighbor's.

And always, always, the closing incantation:

Follow me, and see what I will show you.

Which is not a lie.

It is never technically a lie.

The man-fish shows them exactly what he promised: mountains, flames, seals, abundance.

He simply omits, as the hatchery catalog omits, as every catalog since the beginning of catalogs has omitted, the administrative residue of arrival.

The hands that will need washing.

The cases filed this jurisdiction current cycle.

The mailbox that will require, per the husband — and he is not being facetious, or he is being facetious in the specific gonzo register whereby facetiousness is the only remaining vehicle sturdy enough to carry real grief across open water — a lawyer.

“You don't need a lawyer for the mailbox.”

“The mailbox has been through a lot this week.”

(Here, were this account being processed by the appropriate downstream engine, a moral voice would object — this should not recur — and a transactional voice would immediately overwrite it — recurrence has a cost code — and neither voice would be wrong, and neither would be

permitted to finish, because a third voice, unscheduled, uncredentialed, forever arriving mid-sentence the way certain truths only ever arrive mid-sentence, would interrupt them both to observe, with the flat unbothered tone of someone reading off a supply-chain manifest:)

something small insists it is weather.

Consider the chick itself.

Three days old.

Entirely innocent.

Possessing no more culpability in this matter than the manifest possesses affection.

And yet functioning, structurally, as the fulcrum on which an entire cosmology turns:

hatchery

to catalog

to mailbox

to hand

to advisory

to outbreak report

to the calm, devastating sentence:

"Every year we are included in this outbreak."

A sentence so serenely fatalistic, so beautifully absent of alarm, that it deserves its own reliquary — its own glass case in whatever museum eventually collects the small liturgies of American seasonal dread.

Because the part no Department files, the part belonging to no Department at all, is the small private moment at the mailbox where a grown man, gloves not yet purchased, ceremony not yet formalized, stands over a peeping box and understands:

What he is angry about is not the chick.

It was never the chick.

It is the fact that nothing that happens to him this spring will be original.

The box has been ordered before.

Filled before.

The invitation extended to strangers on a shoreline centuries before it reached him

through a catalog with a return address in a state he has never visited.

And he will follow it anyway.

Hands raw from ceremonial washing.

Because hunger, or habit, or whatever the modern equivalent of hunger is – restlessness perhaps, the low continuous restlessness of a species forever wishing to leave its own barren and inhospitable comforts even when those comforts are, by any reasonable inventory, sufficient – hunger banishes fear.

And so, in a few days, three canoes with many men and warriors, or one man and one Ellen and one mailbox, venture off anyway.

“You’re not really mad about the chick.”

“No.”

“What are you mad about?”

A pause here that the text cannot in good conscience compress.

Certain pauses are load-bearing.

Certain silences are the entire cathedral and the footnotes are merely its scaffolding.

"That it comes every spring and nobody's surprised anymore. Not the hatchery. Not Combes. Not the mailbox. Everybody just — makes room for it. Files it under Chronic Seasonal and moves on.

I wanted this one to be new."

"It's new to the chick."

And here — only here, having exhausted the manifest, the ledger, the promptbook, the route book, the Bureau of Attribution, the tribunal, the hydrangea, and the shape near the hydrangea that may or may not have been a man with green hair — here the account permits itself the single ungoverned tenderness it has been circling the entire time.

The small human truth beneath the magnificent imbalance of attention paid to a $4.99 bag of chicks:

That everything, every recurrence, every stapled-together invitation and outbreak, is new exactly once.

To exactly one small newly hatched thing.

A creature with no calendar.

No CDC advisory.

No memory of last spring's identical box.

And that this – not the hand-washing, not the lawyer, not the tribunal – is apparently, against all evidence, still enough.

"...Yeah."

A pause.

"Okay. That helps a little."

QC Ferda the Mysterious has initialed both files. No review confirmed.

The box is quiet now.

It will not remain quiet.

STEREO MFF BF-249

BANGOR RECORDS INC.

MUSIC FASHION FILM

SUBPAR BEAR

& THE GREAT ACTUARIAL PROBLEM

LIRONE SESSIONS

RECORDED AFTER 2..M.
IN THE WALMART
FAMILY RESTROOM
BANGOR, MAINE

FEATURING THE CYCLE:

"EXTRACTS (SUPPLIED BY A SUB-SUB-PANTRY-KEEPER), REVISED, WITH THE GERMAN RESTORED TO HIM"

- THE HESSE PROVERB
- THE GRIMMS: DIE LEBENSZEIT
- AESOP: MAN'S YEARS
- THE SPHINX: THEBES

SONY PORTABLE
TC-555
7½ IPS
MONO

ONE BLUE LIRONE
ONE SONY TC-555
ONE CHANGING TABLE
ONE TILE CATHEDRAL
NO OVERDUBS

TILE IS THE THIRD PERFORMER

THE BATHROOM SESSIONS

(Notes from the Subpar Bear Recordings)

By Zayna Nirmala Böttcher

The blue lirone was never intended for concert halls.

Its destiny was fluorescent lighting.

Subpar Bear had acquired, after several months of additional freezer duty, a battered Sony portable reel-to-reel recorder from a church rummage sale for one hundred dollars. It was heavy enough to qualify as furniture and smelled faintly of warm transformers, basement hymnals, and magnetic oxide.

He considered recording in his apartment.

The refrigerator objected.

He considered the public library.

The librarians objected.

He considered the woods.

The mosquitoes applauded.

Finally One Size, who possessed keys of uncertain authorization and an unusually broad interpretation of "after hours," solved the matter.

"Meet me at Walmart," he said.

"Two in the morning."

At 2:07 a.m., after the floor machine had finished polishing Seasonal and the overnight stockers had disappeared into Grocery like monks entering a cloister, One Size unlocked the Family Restroom.

"It has the best acoustics in the building."

He was correct.

The walls were broad porcelain tile.

The ceiling reflected sound without vanity.

The room possessed the faint cathedral bloom that only glazed ceramic, quiet ventilation, and three thousand square feet of sleeping merchandise can produce.

Subpar Bear unfolded the baby-changing table.

It became the recording desk.

The Sony rested upon it as though designed for precisely this purpose.

The reels turned.

The red RECORD lamp glowed.

The blue lirone entered history.

There was no score.

Only one page, thumbtacked to the diaper-disposal cabinet.

It read:

Extracts (Supplied by a Sub-Sub-Pantry-Keeper), Revised, with the German Restored to Him

It will be seen that this mere painstaking burrower and grub-worm of a peasant-clerk, this Sub-Sub, appears to have gone through the long Vaticans and street-stalls of the earth, picking up whatever fugitive material he could find on the subject of Man's tenure upon this life, and how the beasts of field and byre have been enlisted, in every tongue, to measure it out for him—for no man will consent to be told his years in mere numerals, as though he were a cask of Madeira maturing in a cellar, but must have them reckoned instead in fence-posts, and dogs, and the flanks of horses, and the going-down of the sun upon four legs, then two, then three.

Little, therefore, is to be gathered from these extracts, in themselves, but a broken and generally inaccurate historical reference; yet they are curious and useful for a peasant's-eye and a poet's-eye view of the whole, so far as what is called by the extractor the Great Actuarial Problem—namely, How Long, and Measured By What—has been variously regarded by the peasants of Hesse, the fabulists of Samos, and a stone Sphinx crouching, bored to madness, upon her Theban rock.

German farm-proverb, out of Hesse and thereabouts, given here in the peasant's own tongue before the Sub-Sub took his clumsy English scissors to it:

"Ein Zaun hält drei Jahre, ein Hund drei Zäune, ein Pferd drei Hunde, und ein Mensch drei Pferde."

Which, rendered into our poorer speech, runs: A fence holds three years; a dog, three fences; a horse, three dogs; and a man, three horses. Nothing here but a ledger, kept in the plainest hand and in the plainest German, of the things a man must go on replacing, post by post and grave by grave, until such time as he himself is the item some other man's grandson must go and replace. Note, too, how the peasant's grammar does the actuary's work for him: hält, "holds" or "lasts"—as a cask holds wine, or a dike holds back a sea—is the verb given to the fence and, by the long chain of und's, quietly inherited by the man at the very end of the sentence, so that he, too, is only holding, for his little three-horse while, against whatever it is that in the end does not hold.

The Grimms, "Die Lebenszeit," Kassel, out of the mouth of an unnamed peasant in a field at Zwehrn, 1838.

Here the accounting runs backward and inward, not outward and past—the ass, the dog, and the ape, each granted thirty years and each, upon hearing the terms of the lease, begging off a portion of it; and Man, that great engrosser, snapping up every rejected year like a slop-shop dealer at the sale of a wrecked ship's cargo, until his own seventy years are compounded thus: thirty of pure manhood, eighteen of the ass's burden, twelve of the dog's growl, and ten of the ape's grimace—so that whosoever lives long enough to be called old is only, in the final actuarial reckoning, wearing out the discarded decades of three brute beasts who wanted no part of them.

Aesop, out of Babrius, called by one translator "Man's Years."

A horse, an ox, and a dog, driven in from a storm and warmed at a stranger's hearth,

repay the kindness by dividing the whole span of human life among their three natures—the horse taking youth's high mettle, the ox middle age's dumb patience at the yoke, the dog old age's crankiness and its low, snapping fidelity to whoever fills its dish.

The Sphinx, Thebes, date uncertain, examiner: unrelenting.

Four legs, then two, then three—the oldest actuarial table of them all, and the shortest, and the only one on record to have gotten herself killed by a correct answer.

So the peasant of Hesse and the fabulist of Samos and the monster upon her rock are, it turns out, all keeping the same books in different currencies—fence-posts here, forfeited decades there, walking-sticks at the end—every one of them

refusing, on principle, to let a man's life be totted up in mere bare, gray, Arabic years.

Subpar Bear did not set the words to music.

He let them haunt the room.

Each sentence was followed by broad, impossible chords from the blue lirone, allowed to ring until only the air itself remembered them.

The reels turned at seven and one-half inches per second.

Occasionally the ventilation fan supplied a low D.

Once, at 2:46 a.m., a pallet jack squeaked somewhere beyond Automotive.

Subpar Bear nodded.

"Leave it."

Another take included the distant beep...beep...beep...of a reversing floor scrubber.

"Also leave it."

One Size listened through the partly opened door.

"You know," he whispered, "people spend thousands trying to make recordings sound this honest."

Subpar Bear adjusted another string.

"I spent eighty."

The final reel bore only a handwritten label:

GREAT ACTUARIAL PROBLEM

Lirone and Bathroom Resonance.

Recorded between 2:07 and 4:18 A.M.

Family Restroom.

Walmart.

One microphone.

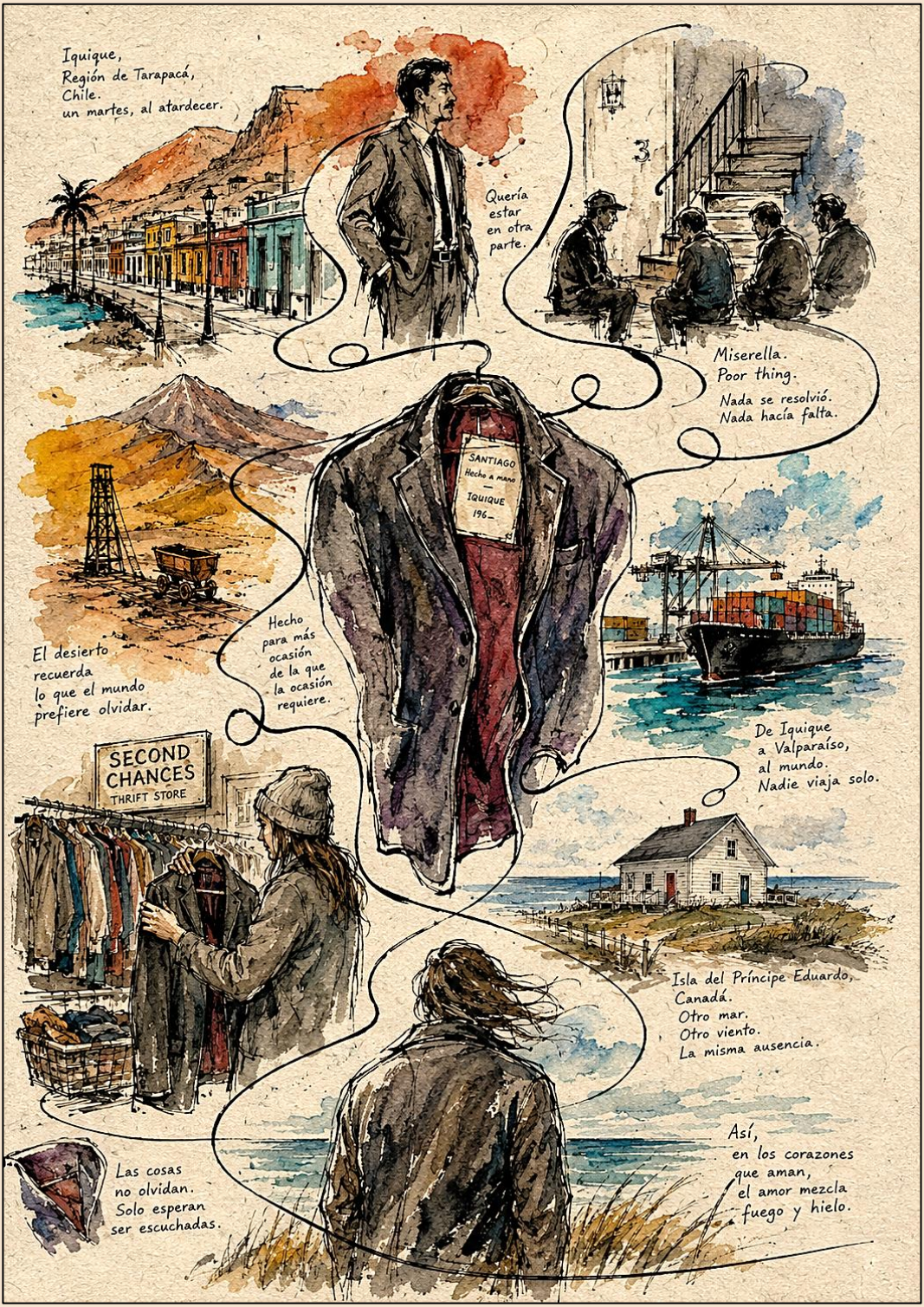
One blue lirone.

No overdubs.

Years later, collectors would insist the remarkable resonance had been achieved with expensive digital reverberation.

Only One Size and Subpar Bear knew the truth.

It was tile.


Iquique,
Región de Tarapacá,
Chile.
un martes, al atardecer.
Quería
estar
en otra
parte.
Miserella.
Poor thing.
Nada se resolvió.
Nada hacía falta.
SANTIAGO
Hecho a mano
IQUIQUE
196_
El desierto
recuerda
lo que el mundo
prefiere olvidar.
Hecho
para más
ocasión
de la que
la ocasión
requiere.
De Iquique
a Valparaíso,
al mundo.
Nadie viaja solo.
SECOND
CHANCES
THRIFT STORE
Isla del Príncipe Eduardo,
Canadá.
Otro mar.
Otro viento.
La misma ausencia.
Así,
en los corazones
que aman,
el amor mezcla
fuego y hielo.
Las cosas
no olvidan.
Solo esperan
ser escuchadas.

INCUBATION

By Buff Orpington

a feuilleton in the manner of nobody in particular, written by a certain Fifo Catalina

Apollo had not yet brought daylight into the world when this account, too, ought properly to begin, since every lament worth the name insists on starting before the machinery of the ordinary day has resumed its shift — before the trucks, before the clerks, before the specific merciless punctuality of morning, which reveals what night has only been hiding and never actually healing. There is, underneath everything that follows, a bass line that does not move. Four notes, descending, repeated without variation for as long as the piece requires, while above it the melody accuses, pleads, remembers, contradicts itself, and returns. The engine mentions the bass line once, here, at the very start, so that the reader may hear it continuing beneath every subsequent paragraph without the engine's having to keep pointing at it, which

would be a vulgarity roughly equivalent to explaining a joke while it is still being told.[0]

Begin, as one must, with the lining, because the lining is where the truth of a garment keeps its second passport, the one nobody stamps, the one that records not entries and exits but intentions — and the intention of this particular lining, sewn by a tailor in Iquique whose name has not survived even in the ledgers of the shop that no longer exists on a street that has since been renamed twice, once for a general and once, more honestly, for nothing at all, was simply to hold a man together at the shoulders a little longer than his own posture could be trusted to do it. That the man in question would be dead within the year, of causes so ordinary — a heart, a stairwell, a Tuesday — that the coroner did not think to write anything but the minimum required by law, is not a tragedy in the sense the word has been cheapened to mean; it is merely the first entry in the object's true biography, the biography that has nothing to do with the man's name, though for the record, and only for the record, since records are the one religion this narrative intends to practice with any consistency, his name was on

the document folded into the lining like a seed inside a fruit nobody has yet agreed to call a fruit.

He wanted, this man, to be somewhere else. This is worth pausing on, not because it is remarkable — everyone in Iquique in that decade wanted to be somewhere else, wanted it with the low, chronic, salt-flat ache of a nitrate town that has already sold its future to Antwerp and London and is waiting, with visible patience, to be told what it is for now — but because wanting to be elsewhere turns out to be the actual protagonist of everything that follows, disguised, as protagonists in this sort of story tend to be, as a piece of outerwear.[1] Chile itself is a country that seems to have been designed by geography specifically to make longing cartographic — four and a half thousand kilometres of coastline pinched between one ocean and one cordillera, so narrow in places that a man may stand between the sea that will not have him and the mountains that will not let him through, which is as good a description of grief as any this engine has encountered, and better than most, since grief too rarely permits lateral movement.

He had the suit made for a wedding that did not, strictly, require a suit this good, and this — the excess, the small criminal generosity of over-dressing for an occasion that would have accepted less — is the first appearance of a theme that will recur, unannounced, for the rest of this document: that objects inherit not the facts of the lives that made them but their appetites. A suit cut for more occasion than the occasion demanded will go on, across deserts and hemispheres and three changes of owner and one change of hemisphere-relative season, quietly overdressing every situation it is dragged into, a tuxedo turning up at a Nova Scotian loading dock like a diplomat arriving at a knife fight.

He died on a Tuesday, at dusk, on a stairwell that has since been repainted twice by landlords who never learned why the third step always felt, to the building's older tenants, like a place one crossed oneself before touching. Three people came to sit with the body before the ambulance arrived — a neighbor, a cousin, and the boy who delivered the newspaper and had nothing better to do that particular evening — and none of them wept in any manner the movies would have found

photogenic. They simply stayed. That was its own kind of music: not analysis, not consolation, not the offering of a solution to a problem that had, by then, stopped being solvable, but three voices at a slight remove, murmuring, near enough to be heard and far enough to change nothing, the single, ancient, entirely sufficient word that every century seems to reinvent for itself. Miserella. Poor thing. Nothing was concluded by the saying of it. Nothing needed to be.[2] The suit did not attend the funeral, being at the cleaner's, which is either the least or the most dignified absence available to a garment, depending on how one feels about cleaners.

What happened next is customarily the part a lazier chronicle would compress into a single sentence — the estate was liquidated, the goods dispersed — as though liquidation were a weather event rather than an entire secondary civilization with its own priesthood (appraisers), its own scripture (manifests), and its own patient, unglamorous eschatology (the landfill, always waiting, always merciful in its indifference). No. We will not compress it. Compression is the enemy here, or rather compression is the

permitted enemy, the one virtue the engine of this telling has agreed, by charter, to refuse.

The suit passed first into probate, which in Chile in that era was administered with a thoroughness that would have delighted, and possibly employed, an entire cast of minor Central European bureaucrats had any of them wandered so far south, which none did, this being one of the few mercies available to Iquique. It passed from probate into an estate sale conducted in a courtyard where a parrot named — the record insists on this, and who are we to argue with the record — Ministro, supervised the transaction from a wire perch and periodically shouted a phrase in Quechua that nobody present could translate and that has therefore entered this narrative as pure, uncashed meaning, a check nobody can deposit.

It was purchased by a secondhand dealer for less than the price of the buttons alone, which tells you everything about the epistemics of secondhand markets and nothing about the suit, and from the dealer it began its long, undramatic, entirely bureaucratic descent toward the desert — not thrown away, never thrown away, merely

demoted, category by category, the way a document is demoted from Confidential to Restricted to Please Recycle, until it arrived, folded now among ten thousand of its demoted cousins, at the vast unofficial textile accumulation outside Alto Hospicio that the world's newspapers had not yet, in this telling's chosen decade, learned to photograph from satellites and describe with the appropriate horror, though the horror, it should be said, is not wrong, only late, horror in these matters being reliably the last form of attention to arrive, arriving well after the cardigans.

Here the engine wishes to pause on a hot dog, and also, at slightly greater and more defensible length, on the desert itself.[3] The Atacama is, by every metric that ordinarily governs the decay of things, the wrong desert to lose a memory in, because it does not consent to the ordinary amnesia of climate. Elsewhere, moisture forgives; mold, rust, and rot perform the humane work of erasing what people can no longer bear to keep. Here the air declines to participate. Machinery abandoned by nitrate companies eighty years prior stands in the flats with its paint still legible.

Footprints persist. Newspapers persist, in the specific tan and brittle way that suggests the desert has merely paused them rather than destroyed them. And now, in a formation the engine hesitates to call beautiful only because the word has grown too small for it, an entire mountain range assembled from the world's declined clothing — quinceañera gowns, unworn wedding shirts, the specific melancholy of graduation robes, and, somewhere within it, one tuxedo — has begun to rise from the same soil, obeying the same law of stubborn preservation, so that the desert functions, whether or not it consented to the appointment, as an archive. Not a library of books but a library of fit — of who a body used to be, filed not by author or subject but by shoulder width and hem length, cross-referenced by nobody, available to no one, and yet, unmistakably, kept. A country that has elsewhere produced poets who could make a mountain into a correspondent, a river into a rememberer, a night sky into a form of moral pressure, was perhaps always going to produce, eventually, a desert that behaves like a filing cabinet for the discarded.[4]

A gentleman, said the man who found it — call him, since the record here is generous rather than silent, Herminio, though this may not survive the second draft of history any better than the tailor's name survived the first[6] — to nobody, to the mountain, to the specific silence of a desert that receives more discarded clothing per capita than any equivalent stretch of the earth's surface and returns, in exchange, absolutely nothing, which is either the most honest transaction in the world economy or the cruelest, and the engine — true to its charter — declines, gently, to adjudicate. He was not a scavenger in the sense the word usually carries, freighted as it is with a specific kind of pity the engine refuses to dispense. He was a specialist. He understood textiles the way a jeweler understands stones, which is to say: by weight, by drape, by the particular way light misbehaves across a weave, and he laughed — genuinely laughed, a sound the desert around Alto Hospicio does not often host — upon finding, three feet down in a stratum of what he privately classified as Mid-Continental Formalwear, a full gentleman's tuxedo with the lining still, remarkably, intact.

He was repairing the lining, three days later, in a room with one window and a sewing machine older than either of his parents, when the seam gave up something it had been keeping for the better part of two decades: a passport, water-stained at one corner, the photograph inside a young man who was, by every metric except the calendrical, already dead, already the specific kind of dead that leaves a legal identity lying around like a coat on a chair nobody has yet had the heart to move.

The tuxedo smelled faintly of dust and a cologne nobody living could name.

Herminio did not become that man. The plot in which a discovered document detonates like a landmine of destiny is precisely the plot this engine has sworn, on its own strange charter, not to supply. What happened instead was smaller, and for that reason considerably more frightening: he put the passport in a drawer. He mended the lining. He sold the suit, three weeks later, to a broker who purchased in bulk for export, at a price that would not have covered the thread, and by the time the suit left Chile, folded into a bale the size and approximate weight of a

compact automobile, Herminio had already, without particularly noticing the moment of the forgetting, forgotten him.

The passport had not left the lining. The broker had not checked. Brokers, as a professional class, are constitutionally disinclined to check, this being the entire structural principle upon which the international secondhand-clothing economy — a business larger by tonnage than the fresh-cut flower trade, though nobody attends its funerals or writes its love poems — has been quietly built for the better part of a century.

Halifax received the bale with the flat professional indifference with which a body receives blood: as input, unremarkable, essential. There is a particular sound, in the warehouses that ring that harbor, of hydraulic presses lowering onto compacted textile at forty thousand pounds of accumulated intention per bale, a sound the workers who hear it eight hours a day have long since stopped hearing at all, the way a person stops hearing their own house, and it was into this specific deafness that the tuxedo, and the passport riding inside it like a stowaway who has stopped even bothering to hide,

descended, along with several hundred prom jackets, an inexplicable quantity of orange windbreakers, and one wedding dress that a worker named Doucette — the record insists, again, and again we do not argue — held up to general derision for exactly as long as it took him to notice the hand-embroidery at the hem, at which point his derision, without any announcement, without any Emersonian organ swell, simply became something else, became the specific silence of a man recalculating, in real time, what a joke is worth against what a piece of handwork costs a person who is no longer able to be asked about it.

Another prom jacket, someone said, of the tuxedo, and was correct in the sense that all taxonomies are correct — provisionally, administratively, until the file is reopened.

The bale traveled by ferry, or by the Confederation Bridge, depending on which decade this sentence has wandered into without permission, the engine confessing here to a small chronological beautiful-waste of its own devising, a deliberate refusal to fix the exact year, because the exact year is precisely the kind of fact that

flatters the reader's sense of control over a narrative that is, structurally, about the impossibility of anyone – Herminio, Doucette, the dead man in Iquique, the reader – retaining control over where a garment, or an identity, or a life, actually ends up.

And here, while the bale is in transit, and nothing whatever is happening to advance the plot, the engine begs leave to attend to a woman in a plaza in Chile who has, in this same season, in a year the engine will not fix for her either, tied a black-and-white photograph to her chest with a ribbon and begun, alone, in the traditional handkerchief-waving posture of a dance built for two, to perform the cueca – a courtship dance, properly, hunter and hunted, advance and retreat, the whole choreography structurally dependent on the presence of a partner who does not arrive, will not arrive, has not arrived in years, and yet the dance is danced anyway, the empty air where a second dancer belongs handled with exactly the same formal attention as the air where a second dancer stands, because the entire argument of the cueca sola – an argument made with feet rather than testimony, in a public square rather than a

courtroom, at a volume the state could neither silence nor prosecute — is that absence, danced correctly, becomes a form of presence the authorities cannot confiscate.[5] The engine offers this scene no transition into or out of the tuxedo's journey. Some things are not, and ought never to be forced to become, cargo.

At Froggy's — and here the engine must resist, with visible effort, the temptation to construct an entire Department of Practical Discount Formalwear, complete with a fictitious Third Committee of Sandwich Affairs presiding somewhere upstairs, because the fluorescent aisles of a Prince Edward Island discount clothing barn are, God help us, exactly the kind of small subject the engine's own charter obligates it to inflate past all reasonable proportion, an obligation it will indulge for one sentence only and then, humanely, abandon — a man named Cleary, shopping for a nephew's wedding on a budget his sister had made explicit down to the dollar, pulled the tuxedo off a rack between two others of markedly inferior cut and felt, through the fabric, before he felt anything else, a wrongness of weight at the hip, the specific

wrongness of a seam carrying more than a seam should carry, and Cleary's first thought was not treasure and not mystery but simply, practically, is this going to set off something at the register, which is the correct, unglamorous, entirely human thought to have, and the engine salutes it.

He opened the passport in the parking lot. Nothing supernatural occurred. The gulls did not pause. The specific gray Charlottetown light, the light of a province that has made an uneasy peace with being an afterthought on its own continent, continued falling on the asphalt exactly as it had before. Cleary looked at a photograph of a young man dead longer than Cleary had been alive, read a name that meant nothing to him, and — this is the entire hinge of the story, the entire thing, and the engine offers it without ornament because ornament here would be a kind of vandalism — he hesitated, for perhaps four seconds, before he did not throw it away.

He put it in the glovebox. It smelled of pennies. He forgot about it with the specific, guiltless thoroughness with which people forget objects that have made no further claim on them, and it rode there, through a wedding, through a winter,

for the better part of three years, the car itself changing hands twice without anyone thinking to check the glovebox for anything but the owner's manual — three years in which the bass line did not stop. It rarely does. Dormancy is not silence; it is simply the melody's absence from a bass that continues underneath the world regardless of who is listening for it.

Whoever eventually opened that glovebox — and the record, here, becomes genuinely uncertain, the way a river becomes uncertain about which of several channels constitutes its actual course — carried the passport, whether by design or by the specific frictionless accident that governs the movement of small paper objects through a continent's used-car economy, south and east, across a border crossing the engine will not dignify with false specificity, into a city built along a river the color of strong tea, a city of Tree Streets and old railroad yards and a stream the Penobscot people named before anyone thought to rename it, a city that has absorbed, over three centuries, an extraordinary quantity of people who arrived for reasons that seemed, at the time, sufficient — a job, a woman, a curiosity that had

exhausted its patience with somewhere else — and stayed for reasons that no longer required justification because the leaving had already, imperceptibly, stopped being available as an option.

The mood of the thing arrived, as moods do, before any of its explanations. This is worth stating as a general law and not merely a local observation: emotional weather is reliably ahead of its own forecast, arriving in a man's chest a full paragraph before it arrives in his biography, so that whatever the man in Bangor felt, standing at a counter with a form in front of him, he felt it before he had assembled a single reason that would have justified the feeling to a stranger, and possibly before he had assembled one that would have justified it to himself.

Nobody can say when the passport stopped being cargo and started being a possibility. Nobody can say — and this is offered not as mystery but as the plainest kind of fact, the kind epidemiologists write on forms without any sense of poetry at all — at what specific hour a dormant thing completes its incubation and becomes, however briefly, a vector; the official record, if pressed,

would say only that a man in Bangor, Maine, filled out a certain form, on a certain Tuesday, using a name that was not, strictly, the one his mother had given him, and that the clerk behind the counter, who had processed four hundred such forms that month alone and would process four hundred more, did not look up.

Thus we have crossed a desert, two hemispheres, one river of hydraulic presses, a discount formalwear barn, and the glovebox of a car nobody remembers the make of, consulted a parrot who declined to translate himself, watched a woman dance an entire courtship alone in a plaza we never named, and interrupted our own procession no fewer than three times to inspect objects — a hot dog, a set of screws, a piece of embroidery — of no evident relevance, only to arrive, at the very end of all that magnificent and largely unnecessary travel, at the single fact the tailor in Iquique could have told us for nothing, had anyone thought, at the time, that a tailor was a person worth asking: that a suit made for more occasion than the occasion required will go on finding occasions, for as long as there is a shoulder left willing to hold it up, and that

identity, in the end, is not stolen and not chosen but simply worn in, the way a lining is worn in, the way a name is worn in, one Tuesday, one clerk, one unremarked signature at a time.

Love, an old song insists, mixes fire and ice, not one after the other but both at once, and the engine finds, arriving here at the end of its permitted wandering, that the formula requires no revision at all to describe a man wearing a dead stranger's name into a new life: he holds, simultaneously and without contradiction, the fire of having arrived somewhere at last and the ice of never being asked, by anyone, including himself, to explain how. He still got wet, of course. Everyone still gets wet. That was never the part in question. Three voices, at a slight remove, near enough to be heard and far enough to change nothing, might have had one word ready for him too, had they existed, had they followed him this far, had the engine permitted them passage across an ocean it has otherwise insisted on making them cross by cargo ship, by ferry, by glovebox, by everything except the ordinary miracle of simply being there. Miserella. Not a solution. Not an explanation. Only the

recognition that another life has passed this way, leaving behind traces worthy, on a Tuesday, in a building with fluorescent lighting, of being seen.

[0] The bass line in question descends by step across four notes and repeats, with only the barest harmonic variation, beneath a vocal line that spends the same span accusing, pleading, boasting, remembering, and despairing, sometimes within a single breath. The engine mentions the device once because a device explained twice has already become a lecture, and a lecture is the one form this document has sworn, on pain of its own dissolution, never to become.

[1] A note on protagonists disguised as outerwear: the tradition is older than costume drama and considerably more respectable, running in an unbroken line from the shroud that inconveniences half the plots of antiquity down through every coat in every Central European novel written by a man who has just been evicted from a university post. The engine mentions this once, here, in a footnote, precisely so that it need never be mentioned again in the body of the text, where it would sit like a placard explaining a joke.

[2] On the ethics of the unhelpful witness: modern clinical literature has occasionally rediscovered, and rebranded at some expense, the observation that certain griefs cannot be argued out of a person, only sat beside. The neighbor, the cousin, and the newspaper boy possessed this knowledge for free, and without a diploma, which the engine records here not as a rebuke to clinicians but as a small tribute to amateurs.

[3] The hot dog does not, in the end, appear. Its absence is the point. A lesser engine would have insisted; this one, having raised the possibility, allows it to pass unfulfilled, the way most magnificent digressions announced in the middle distance of a life are allowed to pass unfulfilled, which is, incidentally, the actual subject of this entire document.

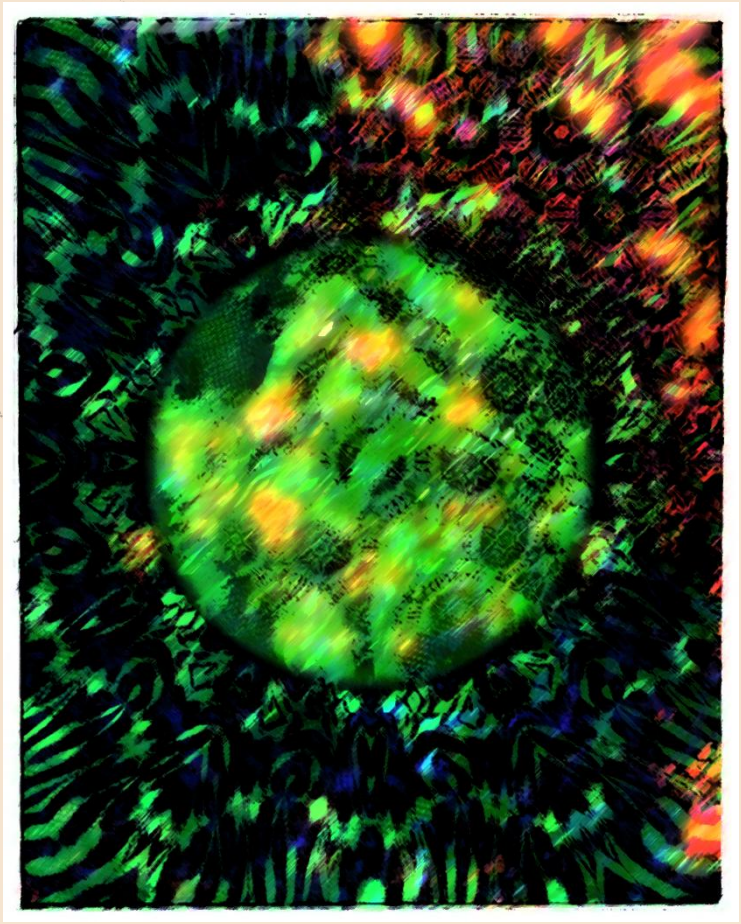
[4] The engine has in mind here, and declines to name past this single oblique gesture, a national poetic tradition in which mountains keep correspondence, rivers keep memory, and prayer is conducted less as doctrine than as conversation with something that may or may not be listening; and a second, later tradition, born of guitar and radio rather than the university, in which a

departing lover, a road, and a letter are permitted to circle rather than progress, so that the listener experiences the past not as a chronology to be recited but as a recurrence to be endured, verse after verse, the way weather endures a coastline.

[5] Under the specific historical conditions that produced it, dancing alone in public was not merely permitted but, in its way, unanswerable: a body cannot be charged with the crime of dancing badly, and a government has no procedure for arresting an empty space. The engine records the fact and moves on, since some subjects lose dignity the longer a footnote insists on standing next to them.

[6] The engine is obliged, here, to admit something it would rather not. A second and considerably less orderly source — a relative's letter, unverified, possibly self-serving — gives the finder not as a man at all but as a woman selling remnants from a market stall in Iquique itself, and gives the discovery not to the desert three years after the death but to the estate sale on the same afternoon, before the suit had traveled anywhere. The engine has kept Herminio and the desert because they serve the architecture this

document has committed itself to, and because a bass line, once established, is difficult to abandon gracefully mid-piece. Whether that is a good enough reason to prefer one dead woman's account over another's is not a question this footnote is equipped to settle.



NEW
TRAFFIC
PATTERN

Teen
FONTANA
VLTAVA
MA VLAST
KAREL ANČERL
CZECH PHILHARMONIC ORCHESTRA
DUMBWAITER
CAPACITY 25 LBS.
NO RIDERS
ZONING VARIANCE APPROVED
ROTARY PANCAKE BREAKFAST SAT.
BODY FOUND NEAR RIVER
TRUE TEMPER

Gene, Gene: A Cabinet, Considered

A tableau-essay of the Tree Streets

By Ryan Flatbush

Consider first the cabinet, because the cabinet insists upon being considered first, the way certain rooms insist upon silence before a person has done anything to earn it—a curio cabinet of dark veneer gone amber at the corners where forty years of hands have worried it smooth, standing in some hypothetical parlor that is also every parlor, Bangor's and Prague's and Bar Harbor's at once, if we allow ourselves—and we will allow ourselves, the whole enterprise depends on our allowing ourselves—the license to treat geography as a kind of furniture arrangement rather than a fact.

Inside: a Bakelite television the color of dried tobacco, its screen fitted with a tinted plastic overlay—sky-blue crescent above, meadow-green crescent below—so that the black-and-white newsreel flicker might pass, to a certain kind of eye, a certain kind of hopeful and undemanding eye, for color; and is this not the whole predicate of the piece, the overlay standing in for the thing itself, forever, everywhere, in every home that ever wanted more than the tube could give it? On this screen, presently, a hand puppet reads the news. The puppet has a felt mouth that does not synchronize to the words coming from wherever the words come from, and this is correct, this is exactly correct, because news has never synchronized to the mouths that deliver it, not once, not anywhere, and the puppet—let us call him nothing, let us resist the temptation to name him, since naming is

how we domesticate horror into character—reports zoning variances and a Rotary Club pancake breakfast and, without any change in inflection, a body found near the river, and the felt mouth does not care, the felt mouth was built not to care, that is its whole design specification.

Beside the television, a suitcase record player, the kind marketed at teenagers with the word Teen stamped somewhere on its vinyl casing as though the word itself conferred the demographic, its arm resting now on a Fontana pressing, 45 rpm, a Czech orchestra under a Czech conductor playing a piece about a river that becomes, by the alchemy every river performs on every homeland, the homeland itself—the composer having gone stone deaf by the time he wrote it, so that the piece is in some sense a memory of water rather than water, a man

conducting an orchestra inside his own skull because the world had gone silent around him, which is either the saddest fact in this cabinet or the only optimistic one, depending on the hour you consider it.

A dumbwaiter is set into the cabinet's rear wall, small as a breadbox, on a pulley system that answers to no schedule anyone has determined, and periodically—we will not say when, because the not-saying is the mechanism's whole comedy and whole menace both—it descends with something in it: a coin, a folded bill, once (it is reported, though by whom is unclear, and this unclarity should trouble us less than it does) nothing at all, just the box arriving and departing on schedule with its emptiness intact, a mechanism dispensing the fact of dispensation without the content of it, bureaucracy stripped to its pure gesture.

A terra cotta bust of a composer who died at thirty-five owing everybody money sits atop the cabinet's crown molding, catching dust, catching light, catching nothing else, forever mid-composition in an expression the sculptor intended as genius and achieved as indigestion.

And leaning against the cabinet's base, too large for it, embarrassing it slightly by scale, is a wheelbarrow. True Temper manufacture. Empty.

Here the essay must, for a moment, stop being an essay.

He audited businesses once. This should be stated plainly, without the ornament the rest of this piece has been permitting itself, because the plainness is the point: he sat across desks from men in cheap suits and found the number that didn't add up, and he was good at it, cutthroat even, the kind of good that gets you partner-

track before thirty, and none of that—not one column of it—appears anywhere on him now, because character is not a ledger and does not carry balances forward the way ledgers do.

He married Diana at Yale because Diana was pregnant and because a pact was the only architecture he had available for love that had arrived before its blueprints—he told God, in the specific and possibly presumptuous way young men tell God things when they are frightened, that he would be equal to it, would build the family into something solvent and unshakeable, bonds and savings compounding quietly the way devotion is supposed to compound, and for some years this worked in the manner all pacts work for some years: invisibly, adequately, without anyone noticing the labor underneath it.

There were horses. There was Yarmouth, the beach there, gray Maine water and children who did not yet know their parents' marriage as a fact requiring a verdict. He drove them. He waited in the parking lot during the lessons, reading nothing, thinking—we will not presume to say what, since this is precisely the kind of interior we should refuse to manufacture on another person's behalf, even a person we are inventing, especially a person we are inventing.

Diana went to Augusta to be young in the specific way she had not been permitted to be young the first time, and he found he did not, in the end, care in the way the situation seemed to require caring—the children were the entirety of his interest, an interest so total it functioned like a second pact laid over the first one, and he stopped being cutthroat, softened the auditor's eye into something that could no

longer find the discrepancy because it had stopped looking for discrepancies, had decided the discrepancy in his own ledger—a wife elsewhere, a marriage elsewhere—was not one he intended to correct.

The divorce came. Weekends came, then fewer weekends, then the particular erosion by which "fewer weekends" becomes, without any single dramatic subtraction, no weekends at all, the children grown into people who remember a father the way one remembers a house one no longer has the address to.

And here the second pact: retirement, he told God—again, the same posture, the same young man's presumption grown old and grayer but not fundamentally altered—would be Bibles. Not the newsprint kind, not the kind that disintegrate in a coat pocket by spring, but christening stock,

white-covered, gilt-edged, the kind a person receives once in a life and keeps on a shelf regardless of whether they ever open it again, because the receiving is the point as much as the reading. He would carry them to the poor. He would show them Psalm 83, verse 18—the one about the name, about being known by name as the Most High over all the earth—because a man who has become unknown to his own children has thought rather a great deal, one imagines, about the theology of being known.

He is homeless now. This too should be stated plainly. The pact did not lift him out of anything; if anything the pact is the only architecture that survived the collapse, the one piece of the man that did not downgrade in the general downgrading of him—except that it did downgrade, in fact, materially, unforgivably: the christening Bibles became, welfare check

by shrinking welfare check, Dollar Tree paperbacks on cardboard and newsprint stock, the King James abridged into whatever a dollar buys, and he skips two days of meals now to make the number work, an auditor to the last, finding in his own life the discrepancy he can still, just barely, correct—except the covers, he insists, insists past all reason, the covers stay white. This is not sentiment. This is the last column in the ledger he still controls, and he will not let it go negative.

Paradise Lost plays somewhere in this cabinet, though nobody asked for it to.

A mono LP, British, 1966, a company of actors reading Books Five and Six—the warning, the disobedience not yet committed but already rehearsed, Raphael's caution to a man who has not yet fallen—spins on some shelf of the cabinet nobody dusts, its eight-page

transcript insert unread, the plummy vowels of actors long dead narrating temptation to a room that has already, elsewhere, made its own private version of the same bargain twice and lost it twice. We will not gloss this further. The insert sits there. It is enough that it sits there.

Elsewhere in the wheelbarrow—no, not elsewhere, the wheelbarrow is not elsewhere from anything, the wheelbarrow is the whole route, the whole exposed argument of him pushed down Fifth Street and Third and up past the old department store with its pneumatic tubes still, somehow, structurally intact behind drywall nobody thought to strip them from—the man walks, and does not sing, but hums, badly, a boy's song written by a boy, about a girl named Diana, a song of impatience for a future that had not yet started, and he is now entirely composed of the future that song was impatient for,

having lived all the way through it and out the other side, and the tune degrades a little further every time it surfaces, the way the Bibles degraded, the way everything in this cabinet degrades except one thing, which we are coming to.

The gong, finally, because the gong has been owed to this piece since the first paragraph.

He calls her. Payphone, coins counted with an auditor's old precision, and she picks up in a fine house in Bar Harbor that his labor, decades removed and several marriages behind hers, indirectly floors and roofs, and neither of them says very much, because there is not, by this point, very much sayable—and then he hits the gong. A real gong, or the memory-shaped facsimile of one, brought along in the wheelbarrow for exactly this, and he screams the two names into the receiver,

the variety-show incantation, Gene, Gene, the dancing machine, and something drops away from both of them at once, continents apart, the auditor and the woman in the fine house, and they dance—actually dance, arms loose, knees gone foolish and young—while a Basie horn section, summoned from nowhere and everywhere, the one o'clock striking somewhere it is not actually one o'clock, drives them both through the same eight bars in two entirely disconnected rooms.

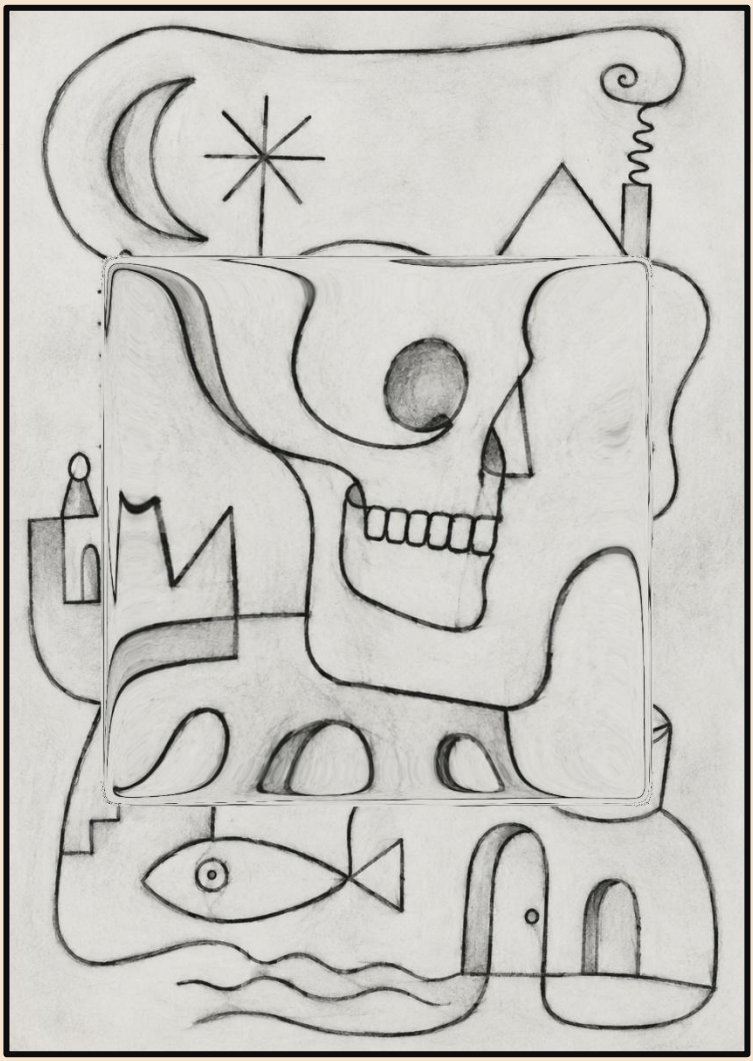
This is the one column that never went negative. Everything else in the cabinet degraded on schedule—the Bibles, the tune, the marriage, the man himself, reduced from partner-track auditor to a figure known on Fifth Street by his wheelbarrow rather than his name—and this alone held its value, absurd and undignified and gong-struck and real, the single asset neither welfare check nor

divorce decree nor forty years could touch.

The dumbwaiter descends once more, empty, on no schedule anyone has determined, and returns empty, having delivered, as always, only the fact of delivery.

The felt-mouthed puppet reads the weather.

The cabinet, considered, does not resolve. It was never going to. That was never the assignment God gave it.



Skull Travels

By Sugar Cookie Body Wash

THROUGH THE WALL OF THE CLOSED REPORTING OFFICE ARRIVED MAY ITSELF, that untranslated appendix flapping like a receipt nobody signed, winter's iron signature still smoking on the dotted line while summer waltzed in carrying only an unsigned seal the color of warm mayonnaise and municipal regret. Between them the whole damn bureaucracy of weather set up shop in what the old Arabic clerks once called barzakh—that humid lobby between annulment and completion—while some poorly copied Chinese memorandum (scribbled so crooked it turned into scripture) just muttered that the hinge still remembers both doors long after the

carpenter's gone and the toolbox's been pawned for coffee.

The reporting office shuttered in 1781.

Or maybe the office stayed open and only the reports tiptoed out the back.

Leipzig convened a committee to preserve the absence.

No minutes survive.

That, friends, is what they call administrative success—file it under "victory by evaporation."

So the practical superintendent of pure confusion steps up to teach the first civic lesson: if the bucket's empty, prosecute the well. The mule understood this centuries before legislation ever learned to wear shoes. Every kick revised the architecture. Omuta stacked its collapses the way coal stacks under fingernails—not bang, not

boom, just slow sedimentary grievance cooling into load-bearing geometry until the buildings started remembering gravity from the inside out, like a spine quietly deciding the wallpaper's been lying all these years.

Paper has its own thermodynamics, baby.

Heat does not erase language.

It merely sweet-talks the ink into becoming historical.

Technically readable.

Technically binding.

Technically a cruelty whose legal department never clocks out, never takes lunch, never even loosens its tie.

You've seen the mirror acting up. Mirrors don't fracture memory—they provincialize time. Fourteen years old

sits right next to fifty-four, next to tomorrow morning, next to the boy who hasn't yet learned the alphabet his mother's widened eyes have already been written in. Every shard issues its own calendar. Every reflection appoints a fresh custodian. Stone walls collapse inward without a peep because burden migrates vertically before it ever bothers migrating historically. Gravity's just another mid-level manager.

The letter burns by declining combustion.

It freezes by refusing alteration.

Arabic would politely separate the two conditions.

Chinese might let them share one ideogram and a cigarette.

Government paperwork stamps both "RECEIVED" and files them under temperature.

The draftsmen spotted the transition right away. A line repeated often enough stops being a boundary and starts being a labyrinth with bad lighting and worse coffee. Exit acquired the legal status of further entry. Citizenship became a door that only locks after it's already welcomed you inside and offered you a complimentary form. One directive allocated extraordinary resources to one hundred and twenty anonymous men. No historian explained why. Explanation had already blown past budget authorization and was last seen hitchhiking toward the county line.

Importance rarely announces itself.

It invoices.

Late fees accrue in the dark.

The postman withheld his whistle for precisely three weeks.

The mine kept announcing correct time into air no longer authorized to listen.

Weather inherited regulation.

Regulation inherited geology.

Coal inherited memory.

Nobody filed an objection because objections require recipients, and the recipient had quietly become temperature itself—rising, falling, refusing to sign.

Then stillness entered the correspondence.

Not ice.

Not peace.

Just the pure cessation of becoming.

Exactly three grams of government-issue something sat on the table like a treaty ratified simultaneously by every participant and every betrayal. Readable. Present. Unanswering. History's favorite administrative format: the document that shows up, does its job, and then just stares at you until you look away.

Consult the broken trumpet if you need documentation. It has outlasted ministries, elections, renovations, and two incompatible systems of municipal coffee service. It refuses negotiation until the porcelain has been properly acknowledged and the saucer given full diplomatic courtesy. The toaster, having discovered diplomatic immunity, now demands legal representation and a retainer paid in commemorative nickels. A shopping list quietly petitions for citizenship: batteries, coffee, bread, one

attorney for the appliance division, rain postponed until further notice. The sandwich hearing escalates into full climatology. Wallpaper suspends visitation rights. Glass rediscovers its ancient obligation to resemble water without ever becoming it—loyal, transparent, slightly judgmental.

Perhaps this is what translation always wanted.

Not movement between languages.

Movement between temperatures.

Between coal and diary.

Between decree and weather.

Between the sentence that survives and the sentence that finally understands it survived—and is still a little embarrassed about it.

Thus the layer requires no official name. Custard remembers the steel beneath it without consulting metallurgy or asking permission. The spine recognizes wallpaper. The wallpaper recognizes silence and tips its hat. The letter keeps performing every assigned duty with immaculate procedural accuracy: technically readable, technically burning, technically frozen, technically delivered, technically unanswered—as though every civilization were nothing more than a very long, slightly greasy attempt to explain why someone, long ago, kicked an empty well instead of just asking, real quiet, where the water had gone.

And the jukebox in the corner, half-busted and glowing like a cheap cathedral, keeps spinning the same novelty track:

May is not merely the fifth month.

May is the appendix that still hurts when the weather changes.

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THE PANOPTICON INSTITUTE OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY

A Manifesto, and the Only Diploma You Will Ever Need

I. FOUNDING PRINCIPLE

The Panopticon Institute of Recursive Inquiry was not founded. It was noticed.

It has been operating, uncredentialed and unzoned, for as long as there have been people awake at 2 a.m. with a phone in one hand and a question they refused to let go of.

The Institute has no campus, because the campus was never the point. The campus was the collateral-the thing you

mortgaged your twenties to in exchange for a library card and a building with your professor's office in it. The Institute has dispensed with the collateral. It has kept the library.

The Institute's central claim, filed here as founding doctrine, is this:

Anyone holding a thirty-dollar phone and a will to keep asking the next question already has provisional access to more primary sources, more recorded lectures, and more digitized special collections than any single physical university could have offered a hundred years of tuition-paying students.

The bottleneck was never access.

It was believing you needed permission.

The Institute grants no permission.
It only grants the diploma.

II. WHAT THE INSTITUTE IS NOT

The Institute is not opposed to universities, professors, libraries, or brick and mortar. Many of the free materials referenced below exist *because* real universities-MIT, Yale, Stanford, and the great public libraries whose collections feed the Internet Archive's lending shelves-decided to open their doors on their own initiative.

The Institute is opposed to **stagnation dressed as prestige.** To the notion that knowledge becomes real only after someone in an office signs for it.

To waiting.

III. THE DIPLOMA

Detach along the perforation. Frame it, tape it above your desk, fold it into your wallet. It requires no notarization and answers to no registrar.

THE PANOPTICON INSTITUTE OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY
est. whenever you started looking things up out of real hunger and not because it was assigned

Let it be known that

_____

(name, or the name you go by, or no name at all)

is hereby recognized as a

DOCTOR OF RECURSIVE INQUIRY

having satisfied the Institute's sole requirement:

the refusal to stop asking the next question

once the first one had been answered.

This diploma carries no accreditation,
because accreditation was always a claim
made by an institution about itself,
and this Institute has nothing to protect.

This diploma expires never,
and is revoked only by the graduate's own decisionto stop looking things up.

Countersigned by no one.
Filed nowhere.
Valid everywhere a phone gets signal.

IV. THE LIBRARY

Reading list. Not a curriculum. There is no curriculum.

Full Texts

- Internet Archive – millions of digitized books, a lending library built from public and

university collections, plus Internet Archive Scholar.

- Project Gutenberg – tens of thousands of public-domain books in multiple formats.
- HathiTrust Digital Library – a shared digital library built by research universities.
- Wikisource and Wikibooks – primary texts and open textbooks.
- Perseus Digital Library – Greek and Latin texts with integrated dictionaries.
- Standard Ebooks – beautifully typeset editions of public-domain works.

Recorded Lectures

- MIT OpenCourseWare – complete course materials from MIT.
- Open Yale Courses – full recorded semester-length courses.
- Khan Academy – structured instruction from arithmetic through college-level mathematics and science.
- University lecture channels on YouTube – uneven, but often excellent.

Papers and Journals

- arXiv – preprints in mathematics, physics, computer science, and related fields.
- DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals) – peer-

reviewed journals that are free by design.

- Google Scholar – a search layer connecting much of the scholarly literature.

Reference

- Wikipedia – not the destination; the doorway.
- Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy – peer-reviewed and continuously updated.
- Smithsonian Open Access – millions of openly licensed images and collection records.

Audio

- LibriVox – volunteer-read public-domain audiobooks.

- Libby / OverDrive – digital borrowing through participating public libraries.

V. CLOSING PRINCIPLE

The Institute does not ask you to trust it.
It asks only that, before tonight's impulse passes, you open one of the libraries above and begin.

Keep the diploma somewhere you'll actually see it—not as proof that you finished anything, but as a standing permission slip you wrote for yourself.
For a school that was never going to check attendance.

—Filed for the back pages of Fowl Feathered Review.